Beyond Belief

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A Buddhist Critique of Fundamentalist Christianity

By A. L. De Silva

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Preface

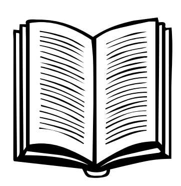
The purpose of this book is threefold. Firstly it aims to critically examine the fundamentalist approach to Christianity and highlight its many logical, philosophical and ethical problems. In doing this I hope to be able to provide Buddhists with facts which they can use when Christians attempt to evangelize them. This book should make such encounters fairer and hopefully also make it more likely that Buddhists will keep their faith. As it is, many Buddhists know little of their own religion and nothing about Christianity which makes it difficult for them rebut the claims fundamentalist Christians make or answer the questions they ask about Buddhism.

The second aim of this book is to help fundamentalist Christians who might read it to understand why some people are not and will never be Christians. Hopefully, this understanding will help them to develop an acceptance of and thereby a genuine friendship with Buddhists, rather than relating to them only as either lost souls or potential converts. In order to do this I have raised as many difficulties about Christianity as possible. If it appears sometimes that I have been hard on Christianity I hope this will not be interpreted as being motivated by malice. I was a Christian for many years and I still retain a fond regard and even an admiration for some aspects of Christianity. For me, Jesus' teachings were an important step in my becoming a Buddhist and I think I am a better Buddhist as a result. However, when Christians claim, as many do with such insistence, that their religion alone is true, they must be prepared to answer doubts which others might express about it.

The third aim of this book is to awaken in Buddhists a deeper appreciation for their own religion. In some Asian countries Buddhism is thought of an out-of-date superstition while Christianity is seen as a religion which has all the answers. As these countries

become more Westernized, Christianity with its 'modern' image begins to look increasingly attractive. I think this book will amply demonstrate that Buddhism is able to ask questions of Christianity which it has great difficulty answering and at the same time offer explanations to life's puzzles which make Christian explanations look rather inadequate.

Some Buddhists may object to a book like this, believing that a gentle and tolerant religion like Buddhism should refrain from criticizing others. This is certainly not what the Buddha himself taught. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta he said that his disciples should be able to 'Teach the Dhamma, declare it, establish it, expound it, analyze it, make it clear, and be able by means of the Dhamma to refute false teachings that have arisen.' Subjecting a point of view to careful scrutiny and criticism has an important part to play in helping to winnow truth from falsehood so that we can be in a better position to choose between 'the two and sixty contending sects.' Criticism of other religions only becomes inappropriate when it is based on a deliberate misrepresentation or when it descends into an exercise in ridicule and name-calling. I hope I have avoided doing this.



Christian Arguments for God's Existence

All Christians, fundamentalists and liberals, claim that there is an all-knowing, all-loving God who created who created and controls the universe. Several arguments are used to prove this idea. We will examine each of these arguments and give the Buddhist objections to them.

The Authority of the Bible

When asked to prove that God exists the fundamentalist Christian will point to the Bible and say it is the best proof of God's existence. The problem is that if we ask a Hindu, a Taoist, a Sikh or a Jain the same question they too will point to their respective holy books as proof of the existence of their gods. But why should we believe the Bible and not the holy books of all the other religions? Using the Bible to prove God's existence is only valid if we already accept that it alone contains God's words. However, we have no evidence that this is so. In fact, as we will demonstrate later, there is strong evidence that the Bible is a highly unreliable document.

The Existence of the Universe

In their attempts to prove God's existence Christians will sometimes say that the universe didn't just happen, someone must have made it and therefore there must be a creator God. There is a major flaw in this argument. When it starts to rain we do not ask, 'Who is making it rain?' because we know that rain is not caused by someone but by something — natural phenomena like heat, evaporation, precipitation, etc. When we see smooth stones in a river we do not ask, 'Who polished those stones?' because we know that their smooth surface was not caused by someone but by something — natural causes like the abrasive action of water and sand.

All of these things have a cause or causes but this need not be a being. It is the same with the universe — it was not brought into existence by a god but by natural phenomena like nuclear fission, gravity, heat, inertia, etc. However, even if we insist that a divine being is needed to explain how the universe came into existence, what proof is there that it was the Christian God? Perhaps the Hindu God, the God of Islam or one of the gods worshipped by tribal religions who created it. After all, Christianity is not the only religion to claim that there is a creator god or gods.

The Argument from Design

In response to the above refutation the fundamentalist Christian will maintain that the universe not only exists but that its existence shows perfect design. There is, a Christian might say, an order and balance in the universe which point to its having been designed by a higher intelligence and that this higher intelligence is God. But as before there are some problems with this argument. Firstly, how does the Christian know that it was his God who is behind creation? Perhaps it was the gods of non-Christian religions who designed and created the universe. Secondly, how does the Christian know that only one God designed everything? In fact, as the universe is so intricate and complex we could expect it to need the intelligence of several, perhaps dozens, of gods to design it. So if anything, the argument from design could be used to prove that there are many gods, not one as fundamentalist and evangelical Christians claim.

Next, we would have to ask whether the universe is really perfectly designed? We must ask this question because it is only natural to expect a perfect God to design a perfect universe. Let us look first at inanimate phenomena to see whether they show perfect design. Rain gives us pure water to drink but sometimes it rains too much and people lose their lives, their homes and their means of livelihood in floods. At other times it doesn’t rain at all

and millions die because of drought and famine. Is this perfect design? The mountains give us joy as we see them reaching up into the sky. But landslides and volcanic eruptions have caused havoc and death for centuries. Is this perfect design? The gentle breezes cool us but storms and tornadoes repeatedly cause death and destruction. Is this perfect design? These and other natural calamities prove that inanimate phenomena do not exhibit perfect design and therefore that they were not created by a perfect God.

Now let us look at animate phenomena. At a superficial glance nature seems to be beautiful and harmonious; all creatures are provided for and each has its task to perform. However, nature is utterly ruthless as any biologist or careful observer will confirm. To live, each creature has to feed on other creatures and struggle to avoid being eaten by other creatures. In nature there is no room for pity, love or mercy. If a loving God really designed everything, why did such a cruel design result? But the natural world is not only imperfect in the ethical sense; it is also imperfect in that it often goes wrong. Every year millions of babies are born with physical or mental disabilities, are stillborn or die soon after birth. Why would a perfect creator God design such terrible things? So if there is design in the universe, much of it is either cruel or faulty. This indicates that the universe was not created by a perfect loving God.

The First Cause Argument

Christians will sometimes say that everything has a cause, that there must be a first cause and that God is the first cause. This old argument contains its own refutation because if everything has a first cause then the first cause must also have a cause. There is another problem with the first cause argument. Logically, there is no good reason to assume that everything had a single first cause. Perhaps six, ten or three hundred causes occurring simultaneously caused everything. And as before, even if we accept the necessity of a first cause, what proof is there that it was the Christian God? None.

Miracles

Fundamentalist Christians claim that miracles are sometimes performed in God's name and that this proves he exists. This is an appealing argument until it is looked at a little more closely. While Christians are quick to claim that because of their prayers the blind could see, the deaf could hear and crooked limbs were straightened, they are very slow in producing hard evidence to back up their claims. In fact, fundamentalist, evangelical and born again Christians are so anxious to prove that miracles have occurred at their prayer meetings that the truth often gets lost in a flood of wild claims, extravagant boasts and sometimes even conscious lies.

However, it is true that things which are unusual or difficult to explain do sometimes happen during religious events — but not just for Christians. Hindus, Muslims, Taoists, Jews etc. all claim that their God or gods sometimes perform miracles. Christianity certainly does not have a monopoly on miraculous happenings. So if miracles performed in God's name prove that he exists, then miracles performed in the name of the numerous other gods must likewise prove that they exist too

Fundamentalist Christians try to deny this fact by claiming that when miracles occur in other religions they are done through the power of the Devil. Perhaps the best way to counter this claim is to quote the Bible. When Jesus healed the sick his enemies accused him of doing this through the power of the Devil. He answered by saying that healing the sick results in good and if the Devil went around doing good he would destroy himself (Mk, 3:22-26). Surely the same could be said for the miracles performed by Hindus, Jains, Jews or Sikhs. If the miracles they do result in good how can they be the work of the Devil?

The Argument for God's Necessity

Fundamentalist Christians often claim that only by believing in

God can people have the strength to deal with life's problems and therefore that belief in God is necessary. This claim is apparently supported by numerous books written by Christians who have endured and overcome various crises through their faith in God. Some of these books make highly inspiring reading so the claim that one can cope with problems only with God's help sounds rather convincing — until we look a little more deeply.

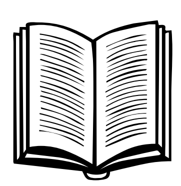
If this claim is true, we would expect that most non-Christians in the world to lead lives of emotional distress, confusion and hopelessness while most Christian through their faith in God would be able to unfailingly deal with their problems and never need to seek help from counselors or psychiatrists. It is clear however, that people from non-Christian religions and even those with no religion are just as capable of dealing with life's crises as Christians are — sometimes even better. It is also sometimes true that people who are devout Christians lose their faith in God after being confronted with serious personal problems. Consequently, the claim that belief in God is necessary to cope with and overcome problems is baseless.

The 'Try and Disprove' Argument

When evangelical and born-again Christians find they cannot prove their God's existence with doubtful facts or faulty logic they may switch tactics and say that perhaps you can't prove God exists, but you can't disprove it either. This of course is quite true. You cannot prove that God doesn't exist — but you can't prove that the gods of Taoism, Hinduism, African spirit worship and a dozen other religions don't exist either. In other words, despite all the hyperbole, the extravagant claims and the confident proclamations, there is no more evidence for the existence of the Christian God than there is for the gods worshipped in all the other religions.

The Testimony

After everything else has failed the fundamentalist, evangelical or born-again Christian may finally try to convince us that God exists by appealing to our emotions. Such a person will say, perhaps quite truthfully, 'I used to be unhappy and discontented but after giving myself to God I am happy and at peace with myself.' Such testimonies can be deeply moving but what do they prove? There are millions of people whose lives became equally happy and meaningful after they embraced Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam. Likewise, there are no doubt many people whose lives have not changed for the better after they became Christians — the same weaknesses and problems sometimes remain. So this argument, like all the others, does not prove the existence of the Christian God.



Why God Cannot Exist

We have seen that the arguments used to prove God's existence are inadequate. We will now demonstrate that logically an all-loving, all-knowing and all-powerful God such as the one in which Christians believe in cannot exist.

The Problem of Free Will

For the religious life to be meaningful we must have free will, we must be able to choose between good and evil, right and wrong. If we do not have free will we cannot be held responsible for what we do.

According to Christians, God is all knowing — he knows all the past, all the present and all the future. If this is so then he must know everything we do long before we do it. This means that our whole life must be predetermined and that we act not according to the free exercise of our wills but according to our predetermined natures. If we are predetermined to be good we will be good and if we are predetermined to be evil we will be evil. We will act not according to our will or choice but according to the way God has already foreseen we will act. Although Christians will insist that we do have free will, God's omniscience simply makes this logically impossible. The Bible also makes it clear that everything people do, good or evil, is all due to the will of God (e.g. 2 Thess. 2:11-12; Rom. 9:19-21; Rom. 9:18).

If people are evil it is because God has chosen to make them evil (Rom. 1:24-28) and caused them to disobey him (Rom. 11:32). If they do not understand God's message it is because he has made their minds dull (Rom. 11:8) and caused them to be stubborn (Rom. 9:18). God prevents the Gospel from being preached in certain areas (Act, 16:6-7) and he fixes long before it will happen when a person will be born and when he or she will die (Act, 17:26).

Those who were going to be saved were chosen by God before the beginning of time (II Tim. 1:9). If a person has faith and is thereby saved, their faith comes from God, not from any effort or decision on their part (Eph. 2:9-10). Now one may ask 'If we can only do what God predetermines us to do, how can he hold us responsible for their actions ?' The Bible has an answer for this question.

> But one of you will say to me: 'If this is so, how can God find fault with anyone? For who can resist God's will ?' But who are you, my friend, to answer God back? A clay pot does not ask the man who made it: 'Why did you make me like this?' After all, the man who makes the pot has the right to use the clay as he wishes, and to make two pots from one lump of clay, one for special occasions and one for ordinary use. And the same is true of what God has done (Rom. 9:19-22).

So apparently in Christianity a person's life and destiny are due purely to the whim of God and as mere humans we have no right to complain about what he has decided for us. The idea that all our actions are predetermined is quite consistent with the idea of an all-knowing God but it makes nonsense of the concept of trying to do well or avoid evil.

The Problem of Evil

Perhaps the most potent argument against the existence of an all-powerful and all-loving God is the undeniable fact that there is so much pain and suffering in the world. If there really is a God of love who has unlimited power why doesn't he put an end to all this evil? Christians try to answer this difficult question in several ways.

Firstly they will say that evil is caused by humans not God and that if only we would follow God's commandments there would be no pain, evil or suffering. However, while it is true that evils such as war, rape, murder and exploitation can be blamed on humans, they can hardly be blamed for the millions who die each year in earthquakes, floods, epidemics and accidents, all of which

are natural events. In fact, if the Bible is correct, the germs that cause hideous diseases like TB, polio, cholera, leprosy etc. and all the misery, deformity and suffering to which they give rise, were created by God before he created man (Gen. 1:11-12). So it is not correct to say that evil and suffering are caused by humankind.

Another way fundamentalist Christians will try to explain away evil is to say that it is God's punishment for those who do not follow his commandments. However, this implies that terrible things only happen to bad people which are certainly not true. We often hear of painful sickness or disasters befalling good people including good Christians and likewise we often hear of really bad people who seem to have nothing but good fortune and success. So it cannot be said that suffering and evil are God's way of punishing sinners.

Next, Christians will say that God allows evil to exist in the world because he wants to give us the freedom to choose good over evil and thereby be worthy of salvation. Evil, they will say, exists to test us. At first this seems to be a good explanation. If a man sees someone being beaten up by a bully he has a choice between turning away (doing wrong) or deciding to help the victim (doing right). If he decides to help then he has been tested and found good. However, as we have seen before, an all-knowing God must already know what choices a person will make so what is the point of testing us? Also, even if suffering and evil exist to test us couldn't an all-loving God think of a less cruel and painful way to do this? Further, it seems rather unloving and unfair to allow pain to be inflicted on one person just so that another can have the opportunity to choose between good and evil.

Some fundamentalist and born again Christians will try to free God from responsibility for evil by saying that it was not created by him but by the Devil. This may be true but again if God is so loving why doesn't he simply prevent the Devil from causing suffering and doing evil? And in any case, who created the Devil

in the first place? Surely it was God.

By this stage the Christian will start to get a bit desperate and shift the argument from logic to pragmatism. He will say that even though there is suffering in the world we can use it as an opportunity to develop courage and patience. This is undoubtedly true but it still does not explain why an all-loving God allows babies to die of cancer, innocent bystanders to be killed in accidents and leprosy victims to suffer deformity, misery and pain. In fact, the existence of so much pointless and unnecessary pain and suffering in the world is very strong evidence that there is no all-loving, all-powerful God.

Why Create?

Christians claim that God is perfect. To be perfect means to be complete in every way. Now if God really did create the universe this would prove that he was not perfect. Let us examine why. Before God created the universe there was nothing — no sun, no earth, no people, no good or evil, no pain — nothing but God who was, according to Christians, perfect. So if God was perfect and nothing but perfection existed, what motivated him to create the universe and thus bring imperfection into being? Was it because he was bored and wanted something to do? Was it because he was lonely and wanted someone to pray to him?

Christians will say that God created everything because of his love of man but this is impossible. God could not love humans before he created them any more than a woman could love her children before she had conceived them. Further, God's need to create indicates that he was dissatisfied in some way and therefore not perfect. Christians might then say that God created spontaneously and without need or desire. However, this would mean that the whole universe came into being without purpose or forethought and therefore prove that God was not a loving creator.

The Problem of the Hidden God

Fundamentalist Christians claim that God wants us to believe in him so that we can be saved but if this is so why doesn't he simply appear and perform a miracle so that everyone will see and believe? Christians will say that God wants us to believe in him out of faith, not because we see him with our own eyes. However, according to the Bible, in the past God performed the most awesome miracles and often intervened dramatically in human affairs so that people would know his presence. If he did so in the past, why doesn't he do so now?

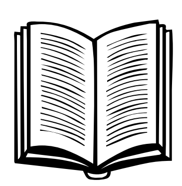
Christians will say that God does perform miracles today (healing, solving personal problems etc) but being stubborn and evil most people still refuse to believe. However, these so-called miracles are individual and minor and leave much room for doubt. If God performed a really impressive miracle which could have no other possible explanation then most people certainly would believe.

The Bible tells us that when the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years God fed them by making food regularly fall from the sky (Ex. 16:4). During the 1980's, several million Ethiopian Christians died slowly and painfully from starvation due to a prolonged drought. At that time God had the opportunity to prove his existence, his power and his love by making food fall from the sky as the Bible claims he did in the past. Buddhists would say that God did not manifest his presence at that time because he does not exist.

God and the Tsunami

Probably the best argument against the idea of an all-loving, all-knowing and all-powerful God is provided not by logic or philosophy, reason or common sense, but by Mother Nature. On the 26th of December 2004 an earthquake off Sumatra caused huge waves to crash onto the shore in Indonesia, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka

and the Maldaives. Over 230,000 people were killed and over 2 million lost their homes and their means of livelihood. Next time a born-again or fundamentalist Christian tries to evangelize you ask them why a loving God allowed such a terrible thing to happen. Next time an evangelical or charismatic Christian mentions to you that God speaks to them, ask them why God didn't tell them or someone else that there was going to be a tsunami. Point out that the tsunami struck on a Sunday when many Christians in the effected area were in church. Ask them why God did not warn even one of them of the terrible tragedy that was about to strike. The Bible says of Jesus, 'Even the wind and the waves obey him' (Matt.8,27) so ask your Christian friends why he did not stop the tsunami. Next time you hear an fundamentalist Christian claim that God healed a sick person ask them why God did not save the 230,000 people from being drowned in the tsunami. If you ask Christians these simple questions they will equivocate, hedge, give long convoluted excuses or try to change the subject but they will be unable to give you a straightforward convincing answer. And why? Because God does not exist.



God or The Buddha

While fundamentalist, born-again and evangelical Christians look to God as their lord and creator, Buddhists look to the Buddha as their inspiration and ideal. Although Christians have never seen God they claim to know him by communicating with him through prayer and through feeling his presence. They also claim that they can know God's will by reading his words in the Bible. As Buddhists neither prays to nor acknowledge God the only way they can get an idea of what he is like is by reading the Bible. However, when Buddhists look at what the Bible says about God they are often very shocked. They find that how God is portrayed there is profoundly different from how they hear Christians describe him. While Buddhists reject the Christian concept of God because it seems to be illogical and unsubstantiated, they also reject it because it seems so much lower than their own ideal, the Buddha. We will now examine what the Bible says about God and compare it to what the Tipitaka (the Buddhist sacred scriptures) say about the Buddha.

Physical Appearance

What does God look like? The Bible says that he created man in his own image (Gen. 1:26) so from this we can assume he looks something like a human being. The Bible tells us that God has hands (Ex. 15:12), arms (Deut. 11:2), fingers (Ps. 8:3) and a face (Deut. 13:17). Apparently he does not like people seeing his face but he doesn't mind if they see his backside.

> And I will take away my hands and you will see my back parts but my face you shall not see (Ex. 33:23).

However, although God seems to have some human characteristics he does at the same time look not unlike the demons and fierce guardians one often sees in Indian and Chinese temples.

For example, he has flames coming out of his body.

> A fire issues from his presence and burns his enemies on every side (Ps. 97:3).

> Our God comes and shall not keep silent, before him a fire burns and around him fierce storms rage (Ps. 50:3).

> Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp (Num. 11:1).

When God is angry, which seems to be quite often, smoke and fire come out of his mouth and nose.

> The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains shook, they trembled because he was angry. Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it (Ps. 18:7-8).

When the prophet Ezekiel saw God and his attendant angels he described them as looking like this.

> On the fifth of the month — it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin — the word of the Lord came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, by the Kebar River in the land of the Babylonians. There the hand of the Lord was upon him. I looked, and I saw a windstorm coming out of the north — an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal, and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was that of a man, but each of them had four faces and four wings. Their legs were straight; their feet were like those of a calf and gleamed like burnished bronze. Under their wings on their four sides they had the hands of a man. All four of them had faces and wings, and their wings touched one another. Each one went straight ahead; they did not turn as they moved. Their faces looked like this: Each of the four had the face of a man, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces. Their wings were spread out upward; each had two wings, one touching the wing of another creature on either side, and two wings covering its

> body. Each one went straight ahead. Wherever the spirit would go, they would go, without turning as they went. The appearance of the living creatures was like burning coals of fire or like torches. Fire moved back and forth among the creatures; it was bright, and lightning flashed out of it. The creatures sped back and forth like flashes of lightning. As I looked at the living creatures, I saw a wheel on the ground beside each creature with its four faces. This was the appearance and structure of the wheels: They sparkled like chrysolite, and all four looked alike. Each appeared to be made like a wheel intersecting a wheel (Ezek. 1:4-21).

Fundamentalist Christians often claim that the many-armed and fierce-faced gods in Hindu and Taoist temples are devils rather than gods. But the Bible describes God as having a very similar appearance. For example he carries weapons.

> In that day the Lord will punish with his sword, his fierce, great and powerful sword (Is. 27:1).

> The sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows, at the lightning of your flashing spear. In wrath you strode through the earth and in your anger you threshed the nations (Haba. 3:11-12).

> The Lord thundered from heaven, the voice of the Most High resounded. He shot his arrows and scattered the enemies (Ps. 18:13-14).

> But God will shoot them with arrows, suddenly they will be struck down (Ps. 64:7).

> Then the Lord will appear over them, his arrows will flash like lightning. The sovereign Lord will sound the trumpet (Zech. 9:14).

Another interesting way in which God's appearance resembles non-Christian idols is in how he travels. The Bible tells us that he gets from one place to another either by sitting on a cloud (Is. 19:1) or riding on the back of an angel (Ps. 18:10). It is obvious from these quotes that God has a savage and frightening appearance; a conclusion verified again by the Bible where people are described as being utterly terrified by his appearance.

> Serve the Lord with fear and trembling, kiss his feet or else he will get angry and you will perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled (Ps. 2:11).

> Therefore I am terrified at his presence. When I think of him I am in dread of him, God has made my heart faint. The Almighty has terrified me (Job, 23:15).

Jesus says God is a truly frightening deity (e.g. Lk. 12:4-5). The Bible also very correctly says that where there is fear there cannot be love (1 Jn. 4:18) and so if God creates fear in people it is difficult to know how he can genuinely be loved at the same time.

What did the Buddha look like? Being human the Buddha had a body like any ordinary person. However, the Tipitaka frequently speak of his great personal beauty.

> He is handsome, good-looking, pleasant to see, of most beautiful complexion, his form and countenance is like Brahma's, his appearance is beautiful (Digha Nikaya, Sutta No.4).

> He is handsome, inspiring faith, with calm senses and mind tranquil, composed and controlled, like a perfectly tamed elephant (Anguttara Nikaya, Sutta No.36).

Whenever people saw the Buddha, his calm appearance filled them with peace and his gentle smile reassured them. As we have seen, God's voice is loud and frightening like thunder (Ps. 68:33) while the Buddha's voice was gentle and soothing.

> When in a monastery he is teaching the Dhamma, he does not exalt or disparage the assembly. On the contrary, he delights, uplifts, inspires and gladdens them with talk on Dhamma. The sound of the good Gotama's voice has eight characteristics; it is distinct and intelligible, sweet and audible, fluent and clear, deep and resonant (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No.19).

God carries weapons because he has to kill his enemies and because he controls people with violence and threats. The Buddha by contrast, showed enmity to no one and was able to control

people by reasoning with them. Addressing the Buddha, King Pasenadi once said:

> I am a king, able to execute those deserving execution, fine those deserving to be fined, or exile those deserving exile. But when I am sitting on a court case people sometimes interrupt even me. I can't even get a chance to say: 'Don't interrupt me! Wait until I have finished speaking'. But when the Lord is teaching Dhamma there is not even the sound of coughing coming from the assembly. Once, as I sat listening to the Lord teach Dhamma a certain disciple coughed and one of his fellows tapped him on the knee and said, 'Silence, sir, make no noise. Our Lord is teaching Dhamma', and I thought to myself, indeed it is wonderful, marvelous how well trained these disciples are without stick or sword (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No.89).

We can just imagine how God would react if one were foolish enough to interrupt him while he was speaking. It is clear from what has been said above that the Buddha's physical appearance reflected his deep inner calm and compassion. People were always inspired by the aura of peace that surrounded him.

Character

We have seen that Buddhists do not believe in God because to them the idea is illogical and contrary to the facts. But Buddhists also reject the Christian God because, if the Bible is correct, he appears to be so imperfect. All of the negative emotions which most cultured people consider unacceptable seem to be found in God. Let us examine how the Bible describes God's character. The emotion, which is associated with God more than any other, is jealousy. He even admits that he is jealous.

> For the Lord is a devouring fire, a jealous God (Deut. 4:24).

Nothing makes God more jealous than when people worship other gods and he tells them that they must even kill our own children if they do this.

> If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son, daughter, the wife

> of your bosom or the friend of your own soul, entices you secretly, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods" which neither you nor your fathers have known, some of the gods of the people that are around you whether near or far, from one end of the earth to the other, you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him, but you shall kill him. Your hand shall be the first against him to kill him and after that the others can strike him (Deut. 13:6).

The Bible tells us that God frequently loses his temper.

> See, the day of the Lord is coming — a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it (Is, 13:9).

> God is angry every day (Ps. 7:11).

> The Lord will cause men to hear his majestic voice and will make them see his arm coming down with raging anger and consuming fire (Is. 30:30).

> His anger will burn against you and he will destroy you from the face of the land (Deut. 6:15).

God tells us to love but he is described as hating and being filled with abhorrence.

> You hate all those who do wrong. You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the Lord abhors (Ps. 5:5-6).

He is described as hating many other things as well as people (see Deut. 16:22, Mala 2:16, Lev, 26:30). God has a particularly deep hatred for other religions which probably explains why Christianity has always been such an intolerant religion. He is often described as feeling special hatred for those who will not worship him.

> Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates (Is. 1:14).

The Buddha had compassion for those who were cruel, he forgave those who did wrong and he had respect for those of other religions. We would expect God, being capable of jealousy and hate,

to be vengeful and so not surprisingly the Bible often mentions God's vengeful nature.

> Behold, your God will come with vengeance (Is. 35:4).

> The Lord is avenging and wrathful, the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and holds wrath for his enemies (Nahum. 1:2).

> For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay', and again, 'The Lord will judge his people' It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:30-31). (See also Rom. 2:5-6,12:19).

Buddhists are genuinely shocked when they read such things. What sort of savage deity is this! What is the point of worshipping a God who is full of the very mental defilements which we ourselves are striving to overcome?

During the forty years after his enlightenment, the Buddha encourages people to give up anger, jealousy and intolerance and never once in all that time did he fail to act in perfect accordance with what he taught to others.

> The Lord acts as he speaks and speaks as he acts. We find no teacher other than the Lord who is so consistent as this whether we survey the past or the present (Digha Nikaya, Sutta No.19).

In the whole of the Tipitaka there is not a single example of the Buddha expressing anger, hatred, jealousy, etc. because, being perfect, he had transcended all such negative emotions.

Attitude to War

The Bible tells us that there is a time for hate and a time for war (Ex. 3:8) and it is widely recognized today that those two great evils feed upon each other. As we have seen, God is quite capable of hatred and so not surprisingly that he is often involved in war.

> The Lord is a man of war (Ex. 15:3).

> The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory (Zeph. 3:17).

> The Lord goes forth like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his fury, he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against the enemy (Is. 42:13).

> When I sharpen my flashing sword and my hand grasps it in judgment, I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me. I will make my arrows drunk with blood while my sword devours flesh: the blood of the slain and the captives, the heads of the enemy leaders (Deut. 32:41-42).

In the last book of the Bible the vision of Jesus is a purely military one.

> His eyes are like blazing fire and on his head are many crowns… He is dresses in a robe dipped in blood and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him…Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. He will rule with an iron scepter. He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. (Rev.19,11-16)

The Bible contains dozens of examples of God helping his devotees to capture cities, slaughter civilian populations and defeat armies (for example Num. 21:1-3, Num. 31:1-12, Deut. 2:32-34, Deut. 3:3-7, Josh. 11:6-11, etc.). Concerning prisoners of war God says:

> And you shall destroy all the peoples that the Lord your God gives over to you, your eye shall not pity them (Deut. 7:16).

> When the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them you must utterly destroy them and show no mercy to them (Deut. 7:2).

If military commanders do such things today they are considered war criminals. Even Christians are often shocked when they read passages like these. Buddhists simply feel that they justify their rejection of God and their reverence for the Buddha.

What was the Buddha's attitude to war? There is of course no example of him ever praising war, encouraging it, or going to war himself. On the contrary, he urged all to live in peace and harmony and is described as being like this;

> He is a reconciler of those who are in conflict and an encourager of those who are already united; rejoicing in peace, loving peace, delighting in peace, he is one who speaks in praise of peace (Digha Nikaya, Sutta No.1).

> **Abandoning killing, the monk Gotama lives refraining from killing, he is without stick or sword and he lives with care, kindness and compassion for others** (Digha Nikaya, Sutta No.1).

But the Buddha was not content with merely speaking in favor of peace or with being peaceful himself. He actively promoted peace by trying to stop war. When his relatives were about to go to war over the waters of the Rohini River, the Buddha did not take sides, urge them on, give them advice on tactics or tell them to show no mercy to their adversaries as God did. Instead courageously he stood between the two factions and brought them to their senses by asking; 'What is more valuable, blood or water?' The soldiers replied, 'Blood is more valuable, sir'. Then the Buddha said, 'Then is it not unbecoming to spill blood just for the sake of water?' Both sides dropped their weapons and peace was restored (Dhammapada Atthakata, Book 15,1). The Buddha had put aside hatred and filled his mind with love and compassion so approving of war was impossible for him.

Idea of Justice

Justice is the quality of being fair and one who is just acts fairly and in accordance with what is right. However, ideas about what is fair and right differ from time to time and from person to person. Christians claim that God is just so by examining his actions we will be able to know his concept of justice. God tells us that anybody who disobeys him will be punished 'seven times over' (Lev. 26:18), that is, one sin will be punished seven times. God apparently considers it to be fair and just. He also tells us that he will punish the innocent children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of those who sin.

> I the Lord am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third or fourth generation of those who hate me (Deut. 5:9).

This is known as collective punishment; punishing a whole family or group for the crime committed by one of its members. Collective punishment is universally condemned today but God seems to consider it quite fair and just.

God tells us that even minor offences should be punished by death. For example, he says that those who work on Sunday should be stoned to death. Once a man was found collecting firewood on Sunday and God said to Moses and the people who caught the man:

> The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp." So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death as the Lord commanded Moses (Num. 15:32-36).

To demand capital punishment for such a minor offence seems to be a monstrous injustice. Not only that, stoning to death is one of the most cruel and barbaric forms of capital punishment. God's idea of justice does not seem to embrace the idea that the punishment should fit the crime. We are told that all who do not love God will suffer eternal punishment in hell. There are many kind, honest and good people who do not believe in God and they will all go to hell. Is this fair and just? God apparently thinks so.

Was the Buddha just? He had attained the freedom of enlightenment and taught others how they too could attain this same freedom. Unlike God, he was not primarily a lawgiver, a judge, or one who metes out punishment. He was a teacher. In all his dealings with people he was fair, mild and merciful and he encouraged his followers to act in a like manner. If someone did wrong he said that one should not rush to judge or punish them.

> When you are living together in harmony, a fellow monk might commit an offence, a transgression. But you should not rush to condemn him, the issue must be carefully examined first (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No. 103).

In addition, when a person is being examined one should remain uninfluenced by bias or partiality and should look at both sides of the case.

> Not by passing hasty judgments does one become just, a wise person is one who investigates both sides. One who does not judge others arbitrarily but passes judgment impartially and in accordance with the facts, that person is a guardian of the law and is rightly called just (Dhammapada, 256-257).

As for punishment, the Buddha would have considered stoning someone to death or any other form of capital punishment to be utterly unacceptable. He himself was always ready to forgive. Once a man called Nigrodha abused the Buddha but later realized his mistake, confessed it to the Buddha and asked for his forgiveness. Full of understanding and compassion the Buddha said:

> Indeed, Nigrodha, transgression overcame you when through ignorance, blindness and evil you spoke to me like that. But since you acknowledge your transgression and make amends as is right, I accept your confession (Digha Nikaya, Sutta No.25).

The Buddha forgave all whether they accepted his teachings or not and even if Nigrodha had refused to apologize the Buddha would not have threatened to punish him. To the Buddha, the proper response to faults was not the threat to punish but education and forgiveness. He says:

> By three things the wise can be known. What three? They see their faults as they are. When they sees them they correct them and when another confesses a fault the wise forgive it as they should (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Threes, Sutta No.10).

Attitude to Disease

Disease, sickness and plagues have been the scourge of humankind for centuries, causing untold suffering and misery. The Bible shows us that God has always considered disease to be a useful way of expressing his anger and exercising his vengeance. When

Pharaoh refused to release the Jews God caused festering boils to break out on 'all Egyptians' (Ex. 9:8-12). He used this affliction to punish men, women, children and babies for the sin of one man. Later he caused the first-born of every male child die. He says:

> Every first-born son in Egypt will die, from the first-born son of Pharaoh who sits on the throne, to the first-born son of the slave girl who sits at her hand-mill. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt — worse than there has ever been or ever will be (Ex. 11:5-6).

This is another good example of God's idea of justice and compassion. Countless thousands of men, boys and innocent babies were killed by God because Pharaoh would not obey him. In many places in the Bible God threatens to inflict hideous diseases on those who do not follow his commandments.

> The Lord will plague with diseases until he has destroyed you… the Lord will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation… (Deut. 28:21-22).

> The Lord will inflict you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors, festering sores, and with itch, from which you cannot be cured (Deut. 28:27).

> The Lord will send fearful plagues on you and your descendants, harsh and prolonged disasters and severe and lingering illness. He will bring upon you all the disasters of Egypt that you dreaded and they will cling to you. The Lord will also bring on you every kind of sickness and disaster (Deut. 28:59-61).

Sometimes God even inflicts hideous diseases on people just to test their faith. To test Job he allowed all his children to be killed (Job, 1:18-19) and Job himself to be struck with a terrible disease (Job, 2:6-8). So unbearable was Job's grief and suffering that he began to wish he had never been born (Job, 3:3-26). God even created some people blind and allowed them to spend their lives begging and groping in darkness just so that Jesus could miraculously heal them and thereby demonstrate God's power (Jn. 9:1-4). Obviously,

God also sees illness, sickness and disease as useful way and of demonstrating the extent of his power.

Now let us have a look at the Buddha's attitude to sickness. He saw sickness and disease as a part of the general suffering that he came to free humankind from. Thus he was called 'the compassionate physician'. There are no examples of the Buddha ever having caused people to become diseased in order to punish them or because he was angry at them. He rightly understood that for as long as we have a body we will be susceptible to disease and he encouraged all to attain Nirvana and be forever free from suffering. But while he tried to cut the problem at the root he also took practical steps to comfort the sick and restore them to health. Rather than inflict diseases on people as God did, the Buddha gave advice on how to help and comfort the sick.

> With five qualities one is worthy to nurse the sick. What five? One can prepare the correct medicine; one knows what is good for the patient and offers it, and what is not good one does not offer; one nurses the sick out of love not out of desire for gain; one is unmoved by excrement, urine, vomit and spittle; and from time to time one can instruct, inspire, gladden and satisfy the sick with talk on Dhamma (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Fives, Sutta No.124).

The Buddha not only taught this but acted in conformity to his own teaching. Once when he found a sick monk neglected and lying in his own excrement he bathed him, comforted him and then called the other monks together said to them, 'If you would nurse me, nurse those who are sick' (Vinaya, Mahavagga, 8). When God was angry he would inflict diseases on people and then watch them suffer. When the Buddha saw people with diseases, out of compassion he did all he could to restore them to health.

Creating Evil

God created all that is good but because he created everything he must have also created all that is evil. He himself says:

> I am the Lord and there is no other. I form the light and I create the darkness, I make the good and I make evil (Is. 45:7-8).

> Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both disasters and good things come? (Lam.3,38)

When we think of nature and remember that God is supposed to have created everything we understand the meaning of these words. Leprosy germs cause untold misery and they were created by God. Tuberculosis germs kill and deform millions of humans each year and they too were created by God. He created the plague bacteria, the fleas and the rats that together cause bubonic plague and which have killed perhaps as many as a hundred million people throughout the centuries. In 2004 13,000 people died in the tsunami No doubt all this is what God means when he says he created darkness and evil. But God tells us that he also created other forms of evil as well. He says:

> When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it? (Amos. 3:4).

This undoubtedly refers to the earthquakes, fires, social strife, wars and other forms of evil which periodically afflict humankind's towns and cities. We read in the Bible that even evil spirits come from God. In 1 Samuel 16:14-16 we are told that an evil spirit from God tormented Saul. Next time a Christian tries to evangelize you ask them to turn to these interesting Bible verses and explain them for you.

Did the Buddha create evil? As he was not a creator God he cannot be held responsible for 'darkness and evil.' The only thing he created was the Dhamma, which he discovered and then proclaimed to the world. And this Dhamma has brought only light, good and gentleness everywhere it has spread.

Sacrifices

In Old Testament times when people broke God's commandments he would get angry and the only way the sinner could make

atonement and soothe God's anger was to sacrifice an animal. God himself gave exact instructions on how this was to be done.

> If the offering to the Lord is a burnt offering of birds, he is to offer a dove or a young pigeon. The priest shall bring it to the altar, wring off its head and burn it on the altar; its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. He is to remove the crop with its contents and throw it to the east side of the altar, where the ashes are. He shall tear it open by the wings, not severing it completely, and then the priest shall burn it on the wood that is on the fire on the side of the altar (Lev. 1:14-17).

God tells us that when the meat, fat, skin, bone and hair of the sacrificial victims are thrown in the fire and burned, he likes the smell of it (Lev. 1:9, 1:17).

In later centuries, humankind's sins became so bad that the sacrifice of mere animals could no longer appease God's anger. He required a greater, a more valuable sacrificial victim — his own son Jesus. Once again it was the blood of a victim which most atoned for sin and which is able to reconcile the sinners with God. Thus modern born again and evangelical Christians often say that their 'sins have been washed away by the blood of Jesus.'

What did the Buddha think of animal or human sacrifices? During his time Indian deities were offered animal sacrifices just as the Christian God was and so the Buddha was quite aware of this crude practice. However, he considered all types of blood sacrifices to be vulgar, cruel and useless.

> The sacrifice of horse or man, the Peg-Thrown Rite, the Sacrificial Drink, the Victory Rite, the Withdrawn Bolt, all these rites are not worth a sixteenth part of having a heart filled with love, any more than the radiance of the moon outshines the stars (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Eights, Sutta No.1).

Christians believe that Jesus' sacrificial blood will wash away their sins just as Indians at the time of the Buddha believed that their sins could be washed away by bathing in holy rivers. The Buddha criticized the Indian idea just as he would have criticized

the Christian idea if he had known about it. To believe that blood, water or any other external things can purify the heart did not make sense to the Buddha.

> In the Bahuka River, at Adhikakka, at Gaya, in the Sundrika, the Sarassati, the Payaga or the Bahumati the fool can wash constantly but cannot cleanse his evil deeds. What can the Sundrika, the Payaga or the Bahumati River do? They cannot cleanse the angry, guilty man intent on evil deeds. For the pure in heart every day is lucky, for the pure in heart every day is holy (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No.7).

This being the case, bathing in holy rivers or sacrificial blood, even symbolically, is a poor substitute for purifying oneself by acting with integrity, kindness and generosity. The only sacrifice that the Buddha asked us to make was to give up our selfishness and replace it with love, wisdom and kindness.

Love

We are told that God is love and the Bible sometimes mentions love as one of God's attributes. However, there are different types of love. A person can love his or her own children but hate the neighbor's children. Someone might have a strong love for their own country but a burning hatred for another country. Although we may love someone deeply, we may, due to changed circumstances, grow indifferent or even hateful towards them. This is the lower less developed type of love which ordinary people feel. But there is a higher, more universal type of love than this. This higher type of love is called metta in Buddhism and agape in Christianity and is well described in the Buddhist texts and also in the Bible. In Corinthians we read:

> Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud, it is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs (1 Cor. 13:4-5).

Does God have this higher type of love? Let us have a look. We are told that love is patient. Patience is defined as the ability to wait

calmly for a long time, to control oneself when angered, especially at foolishness or slowness. We have already seen that God gets angry every day (Ps. 7:11) and that he gets angry very quickly (Ps. 2:11). Obviously he has very little patience.

We are told that love is kind. Is God kind? Please go now to your bookshelf, take your Bible, turn to Deuteronomy 28:15-68 and read God describing in his own words just how cruel he can be. This shocking passage proves beyond all doubt that God is capable of truly terrible cruelty. Obviously he is not always very kind.

We are told that love does not envy. Envy is of course, very similar to jealousy and God often describes himself as fiercely jealous. He says:

> For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God (Deut. 4:24).

We are told that love does not boast and is not proud. Is God like this? Certainly the Bible does not give us the impression that he is a modest and retiring deity. He spends a lot of time telling Job how great he is (Job, 40:41) and ends by boasting of himself that:

> He looks down on all that are haughty, he is king over all that are proud (Job, 41:34).

Next we are told that love is not easily angered. We have already seen that God is very easily angered.

> Serve the Lord with fear and trembling, kiss his feet or else he will get angry and you will perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled (Ps. 2:11).

Finally we are told that love does not keep a record of wrongs that are done, that is, it soon forgives and forgets. Does God keep a record of wrongs? He tells us that he will punish the children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren of those who sin (Deut 5:9). In order to do this he must keep a record of the wrongs that have been committed and long remember them. Jesus tells us that God will never forgive those who insult the Holy Ghost

(Lk. 12:10). We are told that God casts sinners and non-believers into eternal hell. In other words, he refuses to ever forgive them. In short, he keeps a record for eternity of the wrongs that people do. Quite clearly, God does not have the highest type of love.

What about the Buddha? Did he have the highest type of love? The first characteristic of this highest kind of love is patience and there is not one incident recorded in the Tipitaka of the Buddha being impatient. Even when he was abused he remained calm and unruffled. His every action displays a calm, strong patience. When Asurinda cursed and abused him he calmly replied:

> He who abuses his abuser is the worse of the two. To refrain from retaliation is to win a battle hard to win. If one knows that the other person is angry but refrains from anger oneself, one does what is best for oneself and the other person also. One is a healer of both (Samyutta Nikaya, Chapter Seven, Sutta No.3).

Just as he was always patient the Buddha was also free from anger. Even when his cousin Devadatta tried to murder him he displayed only pity and tolerance.

We are also told that love is kind. Was the Buddha kind? Again there is not the slightest hint of the Buddha being anything other than kind and compassionate — not only to those who accepted his teachings but also to the followers of other faiths, not only to the good but also to the evil, not only to humans but also to animals. He says:

> One should do no unkind thing that wise men might condemn and one should think, 'May all beings be secure and happy. Whatever beings there are, moving or still, tall, middle-sized or short, great or small, seen or unseen, whether living far or near, existing or not yet come into existence, may they all be happy'. One should not harm another or despise anyone for any reason. Do not wish pain on another out of either anger or jealousy. Just as a mother would protect her only child even at the risk of her own life, even so, one should develop unbounded love towards all beings in the world (Sutta Nipata, 145-149).

The Buddha did not only teach this but he also practiced everything

he taught. God tells us that he is jealous and by this he means that he is jealous of other gods and other religions. He wants everyone to worship and revere him alone. So jealous is he that he says his devotees should kill even their own children if they worship other gods (Deut 13:6) and that God hates followers of other religions.

> I hate those who cling to worthless idols (Ps. 31:6).

> I gain understanding from your precepts, therefore I hate every wrong path (Ps. 119:104).

Was the Buddha jealous of other faiths? Indeed, he was not. A man called Upali was a follower of the Jain religion. The Buddha explained the Dhamma to him after which he decided to become a Buddhist. The Buddha did not exult nor was he anxious to 'win' Upali. Rather, he advised him to think carefully before making such an important decision:

> Make a careful investigation first, Upali. Careful investigation is good for well-known people like yourself (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No.56).

The Buddha then encouraged Upali to keep offering donations to the Jains He said this because he was able to appreciate the good in other religions and because he was free from envy and jealousy.

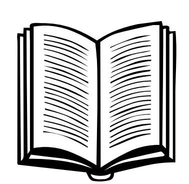
> Vacchagatta said to the Lord, 'I have heard it said that you say that charity should only be given to you, not to other teachers, to your disciples, not to the disciples of other religions.' Then the Lord said, 'Those who say this are not reporting my words, they misrepresent me and tell lies. Truly, whoever discourages anyone from giving charity hinders in three ways. He hinders the giver from doing good, he hinders the receiver from being helped and he hinders himself through his meanness.' (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Threes, Sutta No.57).

Even today many fundamentalists and evangelical Christians will refuse to have anything to do with non-Christians and refuse to help non-Christian charities.

The Buddha was not boastful or proud, he was not rude or self-seeking, he was not easily angered and he did not keep a record of wrongs that were done to him. From the day of his enlightenment, his every thought, word and action was an expression of love and compassion. As one of his contemporaries said:

> I have heard this said, 'To abide in love is sublime indeed', and the Lord is proof of this because we can see that he abides in love (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No.55).

Some of the Bible passages quoted in this chapter are rather shocking; even Christians find them disquieting. When we point out such passages to them they will say that they come mainly from the Old Testament and are not as God really is but how people at the time understood him to be. How amusing it is to discuss the Bible with Christians! At one moment the Old Testament is God's eternal word and at another it is not. When they quote the Old Testament to prove a point of dogma, it is authoritative scripture. When we quote some of its many shocking passages, it is merely a reflection of people's limited understanding of God.



Fact and Fiction in the Life of Jesus

The single thing which makes Christianity what it is, the foundation on which it rests, is Jesus Christ, or rather, claims about Jesus Christ. Evangelical, fundamentalist and born-again Christians are always making the most exaggerated claims about this man; that he was the only person in history to claim to be God, that only faith in Jesus can give a person peace and happiness, that thousands saw him rise from the dead so it must be true, etc. All these claims sound very impressive and certainly millions of people believe them. But are they true? Let us have a look.

Did Jesus Exist?

All Christians and even most non-Christians assume that Jesus was a real person. However, other than the Bible itself there is not a shred of evidence to show that he ever lived. According to the Gospels Jesus was a well-known figure in Israel (Mk. 6,13; Lk. 7,17). Given this claim it is strange that he is not mentioned in any contemporary Hebrew, Latin, Aramaic or Greek literature or in any inscriptions from that time. There is one reference to him in the writings of the historian Joesphus but all scholars now consider this to be a later interpolation. The very fact that early Christians committed this forgery suggests that they did so precisely because there was so little evidence that Jesus ever lived. This is not to say that he didn't exist but only that there is no independent evidence that he did.

Prophecies about and by Jesus

Every time there is a change in the turbulent politics of the Middle East, fundamentalist Christians will open their Bibles and loudly proclaim that the newest crisis has been foretold or prophesied centuries ago. These so-called prophecies are bandied about for a

while and then quietly dropped when they don't come to completion in the way the Christians claimed they would. When one actually asks to have a look at these 'amazing prophecies' one can see that they are usually so vague and general that they could be interpreted to correspond to virtually any event. For example, the Bible says that before Jesus returns 'there will be wars and rumors of wars' (Matt. 24:6) and as there are numerous conflicts going on now this is a sign that Jesus is just about to come again. The problem with this prophecy is that it could refer to any period in world history because there are always a few wars occurring somewhere. When the prophecies are more explicit and clear they are usually wrong. For example, the Holy Ghost predicted to Agabus that there would soon be a world wide famine (Acts. 11, 28.) But there is no record that such a thing ever happened at around that time. Christians also claim that all the events in Jesus' life were prophesied in the Bible long before he was born and the fact that these prophecies came true proves that he really was the Messiah. Let us have a look at some of these supposed prophecies and see if they are as accurate as Christians claim. In the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament it says:

> For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end. (Is. 9:6-7).

This is supposed to be a prophecy foretelling the birth of Jesus. But does it? Other than being born no event mentioned here ever happened to Jesus. The government was not on his shoulders, he was never called nor did he call himself by the titles mentioned here and there has been no more peace since he was born than there was before. This is a fairly good example of the 'amazing prophecies' of Christianity. Before Jesus' birth an angel is supposed to have prophesied that,

> The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, and he will be the king of the descendants of Jacob forever (Lk. 1:32-33).

But if what the Bible says is true David could not possibly have been Jesus' ancestor because God, not Joseph, was Jesus' real father. Further, David was a king in a political sense while Jesus never became a king in this way or in any other way similar to David. And finally, the descendants of Jacob (i.e. the Jews) never accepted Jesus as their king — politically, spiritually or in any other way — and have refused to accept him to this day. So as before this prophecy is wrong on every point. Again in Isaiah it says:

> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its sharers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. (Is. 53:3-5).

This is supposed to prophesize that when Jesus was attacked by his opponents he would not retaliate. But in the Gospels Jesus is portrayed as robustly defending himself against criticism and loudly condemning his enemies. He cursed and criticized the Pharisees when they opposed him and according to John, 18:33-37 he was anything but silent at his trial.

When the Romans crucified people they would nail them to a cross, let them hang there for some time and then finally break their legs, thereby increasing the poor victims' pain and killing them. According to the Bible, when the Romans came to break Jesus' legs he was already dead and so they did not bother (Jn. 19:31-34). This, so Christians claim, was prophesied centuries before Jesus in Psalm, 34:20 where it says that God will not let even one bone of the Messiah's body be broken. Unfortunately Christians have overlooked a very important fact. Although the bones in Jesus legs may not have been broken, the bones in his hands and feet definitely were. When the nails were driven into his hands and feet they must have broken or crushed several of the metacarpals.

Christians claim that Jesus died and on the third day rose from the dead and of course they claim that this was prophesied before it happened. The supposed prophecy says:

> For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matt. 12:40).

But like the others this prophecy is wrong. Jesus died on Friday (Good Friday) and supposedly rose from the dead early on Sunday morning (Easter Sunday). Even a child can see this is not three days and three nights as the prophecy says — but one day and two nights. Another problem is that just before Jesus died he turned to the two criminals crucified with him and said 'I assure you, today you will be in Paradise with me' (Lk.23 :43). Yet according to the prophecy Jesus would be in the tomb for three days and nights before ascending into heaven so how could he assure the two criminals that they would be in heaven on the day he died? But it is not just prophecies about Jesus that are wrong, the prophecies he himself made were also wrong. Fundamentalist and evangelical Christians are always claiming that the end of the world is coming soon. Where do they get this bizarre idea from? They get it from Jesus. He believed and explicitly taught that the world would end within his own lifetime or very soon afterwards.

> I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened (Lk. 21:25-33).

By 'this generation' he was obviously referring to the people he was addressing. On another occasion he again told the people who stood listening to him that some of them would still be alive when the end of the world came.

> I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom (Matt. 16:28).

On every one of these points Jesus' prophecies proved to be wrong.

The people who lived at his time have been dead for two thousand years and the world has not ended nor has Jesus returned. Jesus' disciples finished going through all the cities in Israel within a few years of his death and he has still not returned.

These and other examples prove that most of the supposed prophecies about and by Jesus are false. But even where a prophecy seems to be true this does not necessarily mean anything. It can be demonstrated that whoever wrote the Gospels deliberately invented events in the life of Jesus to make them fit into what they thought were prophecies about him. We will examine one well-known example of this. Several hundred years before Jesus the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek, the language of the day. When a passage in Isaiah which prophesizes that the Messiah will be born of a young woman (Is. 7:14) was translated, the word for young woman (almah) was mistranslated as virgin (parthenas). When the authors of the Gospels read this they thought that to qualify to be the Messiah Jesus' mother had to be a virgin and so they fabricated the story of the virgin birth. In fact it only became necessary to invent this story because of a mistranslation. So it is not that prophecies foretold events in Jesus' life but rather that events in Jesus' biography were fabricated to fit into prophecies.

The Birth of Jesus

We often hear fundamentalist, born-again and evangelical Christians boast that no one has ever found a mistake in the Bible, just as we will often hear them claim that the Bible is the inspired word of God and therefore infallible. Considering how carefully they read their Bibles it is difficult to know how such claims can be made, much less believed.

Let us have a look at what the Bible says about the birth of Jesus. In one place we are told that news of Jesus' impending birth was conveyed to Joseph, Jesus' father, in a dream (Matt. 1:20). Then in

another we are told that the news was given to Mary, Jesus' mother, by an angel (Lk. 1:28). Which of these two stories are true? Was it Joseph who got the news or Mary? Christians will say that they both got it but then why does the Gospel of Matthew fail to mention the angel appearing to Mary and the Gospel of Luke fail to mention Joseph's dream? On one hand we are told that Jesus' parents went on a journey before the baby was born (Lk. 2:4-7) and on the other that they went on a journey after the birth (Matt 2:13-14). Which of these true stories is true? When we come to where Jesus was actually born we meet with more contradictions. Was Jesus born at home (Matt. 1:24-25) or was he born in a manger at the back of an inn (Lk. 2:7)? Next we come to Jesus' ancestry. We have two lists of all Jesus' ancestors on his father's side but when we look at the names in these we find almost no correspondence between them. They do not even agree about the name of Jesus' grandfather. One says his name was Jacob (Matt 1:16) and the other says his name was Heli (Lk. 3:23). Moreover, it is ridiculous to talk about Jesus' ancestors on his father's side and Jesus being related to King David (Matt. 1:1), when not Joseph but God is supposed to be Jesus' real father.

Was He A Good Teacher?

At the time of the Buddha there was a religious sect called the Niganthas which fell apart soon after the death of its founder Nataputta.

> And at his death the Niganthas split into two parties, quarrelling and disputing, fighting and attacking each other and using a war of words… You would have thought that they were disgusted, displeased and repelled when they saw that the doctrine was so badly presented, so poorly laid out and so ineffective in calming the passions because it had been taught by one who was not fully enlightened and was now without guide or arbiter (Digha Nikaya, Sutta No.29).

Interestingly enough, this was exactly what happened as soon as

Jesus died and for exactly the same reasons. Jesus is justly famous for the parables he used to illustrate his ideas but at the same time he often failed to make his meaning clear. Sometimes this was because he himself was unclear about his ideas and at other times it seems that he was just a poor communicator. What is even more strange is that Jesus seems to have sometimes deliberately obscured his message.

> And when his disciples asked him what the parable meant, he said; 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the Kingdom of God: but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand' (Lk. 8:9-10; Mk. 8:17-18).

> But they did not understand this saying, and it was concealed from them, that they could not perceive it: and they were afraid to ask him about this saying (Lk. 9:45).

Add to this deliberate obscurity the numerous contradictory ideas in Jesus' teachings and it is not hard to imagine why his disciples fell into disagreement as soon as he died. In the Epistles there are numerous references to the bickering and squabbling between the various factions amongst the early Christians. Paul complained that all the churches in Asia turned against him (2 Tim. 1:15) and that they refused to take his side in some theological argument (2 Tim. 4:14-16). He tells us of his squabble with Peter and the elders of the church in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:11-13), of how he was snubbed by the church at Philippi (1 Thess. 2:1-20), and of course he accused his rivals of not having real faith (2 Thess. 3:1-3), of teaching 'another Christ' and of not really knowing God (Tit. 1:10-16). John bitterly complained that his opponents threw his supporters out of the church (John, 1:9-10). Paul made a desperate but futile appeal for harmony between the early Christians.

> I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree with one another that there may be no divisions between you and that you might be perfectly united in mind and thought (1 Cor. 1:10-12).

What were the early Christians squabbling over? Just about everything. But one of the numerous points of disagreement between them seems to have been on the issue of whether it was necessary to be circumcised (Rom. 2:25-29, Gal. 5:2-12, Gal. 6:12-15, Phil. 3:2-4, Col. 2:11-13). Paul was against it and called those who disagreed with him 'dogs' (Phil. 3:2), said that he hoped that they would go all the way and castrate themselves (Gal. 5:12) and he warned other Christians to keep away from them (Tit. 1:10). All this is reminiscent of modern evangelical Christians. While confidently proclaiming that they alone have the truth there is almost no agreement between them about what that truth is. They have split into hundreds of mutually hostile denominations, sects, cults and churches and can't even sit down with each other and worship the same God together. For Buddhists this is all very bewildering. If it is true that Jesus' gospel of salvation is so clear and if it is true that God communicates with and guides Christians through prayer, why is it that there is so much disagreement and ill-will among them? Why are there so many churches and which it the true one?

The Last Supper

The Bible gives us almost no information about the life of Jesus until he started teaching at about the age of thirty. And even after his public ministry started there is great confusion about what happened and when. For instance, the Gospel of John claims that the cleansing of the temple took place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Jn. 2:13-14), but the Gospel of Luke claims it took place at the end (Lk. 19:45-46). In one place we are told that Jesus stayed in Peter's house and then healed a leper (Mk. 1:29-45), while in another we are told that he healed the leper and then went in Peter's house (Matt. 8:1-2, 8:14). On one hand we are told that the centurion spoke personally to Jesus (Matt 8:5); in a complete contradiction to this we are told that the centurion sent people on

his behalf to speak to Jesus (Lk. 7:1). In the Gospel of Mark we are told that Jesus left Tyre and passed through Sidon on his way to the Sea of Galilee (Mk. 7:31). A look at any map of Israel will show that this is quite impossible as Sidon is in another direction altogether.

Christians will reluctantly admit these mistakes but say that they are minor and of no significance. Perhaps so, but they do prove that the Bible is not infallible and if the Bible makes mistakes about what Jesus did, it could just as easily make mistakes about what he said. But even when we look at very important events in Jesus' life we find confusion. Let us have a look at the Last Supper. According to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus' Last Supper took place on the Jewish holy day of Passover (Matt. 26:17-20, Mk. 14:12-17, Lk. 22:7-14). The Gospel of John on the other hand claims that it took place on the day before Passover (Jn. 19:14). Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were supposed to be among the disciples who attended the Last Supper with Jesus and they are also supposed to be the disciples who remembered and wrote down all Jesus' teachings. If they couldn't even remember the day of the Last Supper how do we know that they remembered Jesus' teachings correctly?

The Trial

Now we will have a look at that most important event in the life of Jesus, his trial. As described in the Bible the trial is predictably full of contradictions but it also raises many questions which are difficult to answer. The trial and the events leading up to it are usually described by Christians like this. Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey to the acclaim of the population of the city. He was arrested by the henchmen of the Jewish priests who beat him and handed him over to the Romans. The Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, could find no guilt in Jesus but the Jewish priests kept insisting he was guilty. Unable to make up his mind, the

governor decided to ask the crowd what they wanted, either the release of Jesus or a Jewish rebel. The crowd cried out for the release of the rebel and the crucifixion of Jesus. So Pilate reluctantly had him executed.

Could the trial really have proceeded like this? Let us have a look. We are told that when Jesus rode into Jerusalem crowds of delighted people greeted him, laying their cloaks on the road and praising him as their king (Mk. 11:8). But only a day later a huge crowd were screaming out for him to be crucified (Mk. 15:12-14). This sudden change from adulation to hatred is hard to explain. Next we have Jesus brought before Pontius Pilate. The Bible portrays Pilate as a man who can find no guilt in Jesus but who is pushed into crucifying him by the Jewish priests. This is clearly impossible. The Romans were famous for their strong and effective government, their judicial system was known for its justice and they did not send weak, indecisive men to govern troublesome parts of the empire. Who could believe that a Roman governor would allow the people he ruled to make up his mind for him and tell him how to run his own court? The Bible says that Pilate asked the crowd whether they wanted either Jesus or Barabbas released (Lk. 23:13-18), and when they said Barabbas, he was set free and Jesus was executed. Now credibility has been stretched to the limit. We are asked to believe that a Roman governor would execute a man he believed to be innocent and set free a rebel involved in murder and trying to overthrow Roman rule (Lk. 23:19). The Romans did not conquer and govern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East by releasing dangerous rebels. They were completely ruthless with all who opposed them. So the Christian account of Jesus' trial is unconvincing.

If we read what Jesus is supposed to have said at his trial we can see that all the accounts of it are fabrications. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus 'gave no answer' (Matt. 27:12) and 'made no reply, not even to a single charge, to the great amazement of the

governor' (Matt. 27:14) during his trial. In a complete contradiction to this the Gospel of John claims that Jesus answered charges, asked questions and spoke much during his trial (Jn. 18:33-37). Which of these two accounts is the true one? Was Jesus silent or did he speak? Like the Gospel of John, the Gospel of Luke also claims that Jesus spoke during his trial. But if we compare his account of what was said with Luke's account we find that almost every sentence is different (Compare Jn. 18:33-37 with Lk. 22:66-70). Obviously, Christian claims that the Bible is an accurate, reliable historical document are completely untrue.

What Happened to Judas?

Judas was the disciple who betrayed Jesus. After he had done this he is said to have died. But how did he die? Here, as with many other incidents, the Bible gives us several confused accounts. According to Matthew this is what happened:

> When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. 'I have sinned' he said, 'for I have betrayed innocent blood.' 'What is that to us', they replied 'That's your responsibility!' So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the coins and said, 'It is against the law to put this into treasury, since it is blood money.' So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the field of blood to this day (Matt. 27:3-8).

Elsewhere we are told a different story.

> With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, field of blood (Acts, 1:18-19).

Was it Judas who bought the field or was it the chief priests? Did Judas hang himself or did he fall down and have his body burst open?

Jesus' Last Words

Many Christian doctrines are based on a phrase or sentence which Jesus is supposed to have spoken. To prove the truth of their beliefs fundamentalist Christians will rush to their Bibles and point sometimes to a single sentence saying as proof. They assume that every phrase, every sentence, every word in the Bible is exactly what Jesus said. We have already seen that the Bible is quite confused about what Jesus did and said. In fact even Jesus' last words have not been accurately recorded. According to Matthew, Jesus' last words were: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46). According to Mark he just gave a loud cry and died (Mk. 15:37). According to Luke he said, 'Father, into your hands I entrust my spirit' (Lk. 23:46). According to John, Jesus' last words were: 'It is finished.' (Jn. 19:30). Once again we have discrepancies and contradictions which make it impossible to know what Jesus actually said.

The Resurrection

The most important event in Jesus' life and the cornerstone of Christian faith is the supposed resurrection of Jesus. Paul very correctly said, 'If Christ has not been raised our preaching is empty and our belief comes to nothing' (I Cor. 15,14). With unusual frankness he also admitted that the idea that Jesus' resurrection can somehow save sinners makes no sense (1 Cor. 1,21) and that one would have to be a fool to believe it (1 Cor. 3,18). The informed Buddhist would agree with Paul on this matter. When Paul preached about Jesus' resurrection in Athens, the cradle of logic, reason and philosophy, people just laughed at him (Acts, 17,32). Buddhists are too polite to laugh at the idea of resurrection but they can find no good reason why they should believe it. Let us examine what the Bible says about the resurrection. At this point the reader is advised to have a Bible ready and to check the references.

Jesus' Death

Matthew says that as Jesus died the curtain in the Temple was tore from top to bottom and other strange things happened. But most extraordinary of all he claims that numerous people who had recently died came out of their tombs and walked around in Jerusalem (Matt. 27,52). If this is true it must have been one of the most amazing days in history. People must have been talking about it for years. News of it must have spread far and wide and at least some of those who came back to life must have written something about their astonishing experience. It is very strange therefore that this extraordinary event is not mentioned in any of the historical documents of the time including even the other Gospels.

(1) When did the Resurrection happen?

(2) All four Gospels say that the events described took place early on Sunday morning (Matt. 28:1, Mk. 16:1, Lk. 24:1, Jn. 20:1). This is the only detail concerning the resurrection on which all the Gospels agree.

(3) Who went to the tomb?

Now the problems begin. Matthew says that the two Marys went to the tomb (Matt 28:1); Mark says that the two Marys and Salome went (Mk. 16:1); Luke says that the two Marys, Joanna and some other women went (Lk. 24:10); and John says that Mary went alone (Jn. 20:1). Christians claim that the Bible contains no mistakes but surely there are a few mistakes here. They claim that those who wrote the Gospels were inspired by God as they wrote, but apparently not inspired enough to be able to count properly.

(4) Was there an earthquake?

Matthew tells us that at that time there was a 'great earthquake' (Matt 28:2), but why do the other three Gospels fail to mention it? Surely a great earthquake, especially occurring at such a

significant moment, would be hard to forget. It is far more likely that Matthew just made up the story to add drama to his account, in other words he lied.

(5) How many angels?

Next, Matthew claims that an angel appeared before the women, rolled back the stone door and sat upon it (Matt. 28:2). He also says that the guards were so frightened that they fainted (Matt. 28:4). Mark's story is quite different. He claims that the door had already been removed before the women arrived so they went into the tomb and saw the angel inside (Mk. 16:4-5). And he doesn't mention any guards. Luke's story is even more inventive. He claims that the women went into the tomb and saw not one but two angels (Lk. 24:4). Obviously someone is not telling the truth. John claims that Mary went to the tomb alone, saw the tomb open, ran to get the other disciples and when they went into the tomb she waited outside. After everyone went home Mary waited and as she did two angels appeared to her and then Jesus appeared although she could not recognize him (Jn. 20:12-14). And it is on this garbled 'evidence' that Christianity rests upon.

(6) Post-Resurrection Appearances

There are several accounts of Jesus appearing to his disciples and others after his supposed resurrection but all of these raise more questions than they answer. For example, Paul says that Jesus appeared to a crowd of five hundred people, many of whom he claimed were still alive (1 Cor. 15,6). One would think that having five hundred eyewitnesses to an event would be conclusive proof that it actually happened. So it is strange that Paul neglected to say where this amazing event happened or give the name of even one of these witnesses. It is equally strange that none of them ever wrote about what they saw. Stranger still is the fact that this appearance is not mentioned in the four Gospels. It is well-known that people tend to elaborate their stories the more often they repeat them and

even more so if they are trying to impress or convince others. It is also well-known that those who lie can't always remember the lies they have told and end up contradicting themselves. The accounts of Paul's experience of the resurrected Jesus are a good example of these tendencies. First it is claimed that Paul was blinded by a flash of light and then heard a voice. His companions remained standing and heard the voice although they couldn't see the light (Acts, 9,3-8). Later, when Paul repeats this tale, he reverses it saying that his companions fell to the ground (Acts, 26,14) and saw the light although they couldn't hear the voice (Acts, 22,9), Further, each time Paul recounts what Jesus is supposed to have said to him it gets a bit longer and more detailed (compare Acts, 9,6 with Acts, 26,15-18). Such are the very dubious 'testimonies' that that form the foundations of Christianity.

(7) Records of the Resurrection

When were these accounts of the Resurrection written and by whom? Over the last two centuries scholars have examined the four Gospels in minute detail and from almost every conceivable perspective. Probably no literature in history has been so thoroughly and carefully studied. And this is the conclusion they have come to. None of the Gospels were written by the disciples of Jesus, i.e. Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. As to the age of the Gospels, Mark was written about 40 years after Jesus death while Luke was written about 75 or 80 years after his death. Mathew was written between 80 and 90 years after Jesus death and is largely copied from Mark, while John was probably written after 100 AD. All of the Gospels have been edited, eg. Mark's account of Jesus rising from the dead (Mk. 16,9-19) was not part of the original but was added years later. To sum up, none of the Gospels give an eye witness account of the Resurrection or even a second or third-hand account of it, and all of them were written decades after the events they claim to report.

(8) What Did Happen?

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead what did happen to him? As we have no evidence apart from the Bible we will probably never know but we could make an intelligent guess. We know that there had been a lot of trouble in Jerusalem, some of it caused by Jesus himself, and the authorities must have been anxious to keep the peace. It is quite possible that either the Jewish priests or the Romans removed Jesus' body from the tomb so that it could not become the focus of more trouble. We know that the authorities placed guards at Jesus' tomb suggesting that they thought his body might be removed (Matt.28,4). There is no more evidence for this scenario than there is for the Christian explanation but it is a thousand times more possible and believable. If someone came to you saying that they saw a dead man come to life, rise up into the sky and disappear into the clouds, you would probably be very skeptical because such things go so much against ordinary experience. If you asked whether anyone else had seen this happen and they replied that five hundred people had witnessed it and you asked for the names of some of them but they were unable to provide the name of even one, you would probably become quite suspicious. If you then asked when all this was supposed to have happened and they said more than 40 years ago, (the Gospel of Mark, the earliest Gospel, was written about 40 after Jesus' death) you could not be blamed for dismissing the whole thing as a delusion, a rumor or a tall story.

Was Jesus God?

Christians claim that Jesus was God. Let us see if there is any justification for this strange claim. If Jesus really was God it is very strange that he never said so. There is not one place in the whole of the Bible where Jesus simply and unambiguously says, 'I am God.' Christians will object to this and say that Jesus often called himself or was called the Son of God. However, the Bible clearly

shows that any good person who had strong faith qualified to be called a Son of God. For example, Jesus called Adam a son of God (Lk. 3:38).

> It will happen that in the very place where it was said of them, 'You are not my people' they will be called 'sons of the living God' (Rom. 9:26).

> Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your father in heaven (Matt. 5:44-45).

> You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26).

> You are God's; you are all sons of the Most High (Ps. 82:6).

Jesus is called God's 'only begotten son' but even this is not unique. In the Psalms God says to King David, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you' (Ps. 2:7). Further, Jesus distinctly said that when he called himself a son of God he did not mean he was God or related to God in a literal sense. When the Jewish priests criticized him for claiming to be equal with God, Jesus said:

> Is it not written in your law, 'I have said you are gods?' If he called them 'gods' to whom the word of God came — and the Scripture cannot be broken — what about one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? (Jn. 10:34-36).

Christians will protest that in these quotes 'son of god' is not written in capitals but when Jesus makes his claims capitals are used thus, 'Son of God.' But capital letters to make a phrase outstanding or to give it emphasis is an innovation of modern English. In ancient Greek and Aramaic, the languages in which the New Testament was written, capital letters were never used and so the distinction between 'son of god' and 'Son of God' did not exist. Christians make an enormous fuss about Jesus' claims to be a son of God but as we can see, there is absolutely nothing unique in this claim. Christians could say that the term Son of God is used in the Bible in two different ways — as a title for a particularly holy person and for the actual son of God, Jesus, who was with God in heaven before coming to earth. But even in this second sense

Jesus was not unique. The Bible tells us that God had numerous sons with him in heaven who later came to earth and lived with humans just as Jesus is supposed to have done.

> When mankind began to increase and spread all over the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful; so they took for themselves such women as they chose (Gen. 6:1-3)

In the Bible Jesus is called the Son of Man more than eighty times. Yet the Bible also tells us that in the eyes of God the Son of Man is nothing more than a worm (Job, 25:6). How can Christians claim that the Son of Man is God when the Bible itself says that the Son of Man is nothing more than a lowly worm?

Christians will then insist that Jesus was called the Messiah and that this proves he was God. The Hebrew word *mashiah* of which the Greek translation is christos simply means 'anointed one,' and refers to anyone sent by God to help the people of Israel. Even a non-Jew could be and sometimes was called a Messiah. The Bible even calls the pagan Persian King Cyrus a Messiah because he let the Jews return to their homeland (Is. 45:1). So just because Jesus was called the Messiah does not prove he was God. In fact, throughout the Bible Jesus goes out of his way to make it clear that he was **not** God. When someone called Jesus 'good teacher' he said:

> Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone (Lk. 18:19).

Now if Jesus was God why would he deny that he was good? We are told that Jesus prayed but if he was God why would he need to pray to himself? And when Jesus prayed, he said to God, 'not my will but yours' (Lk. 22:42). Quite clearly he was making a distinction between God's will and his own. Jesus said that no one has even seen God (Jn. 1:18), meaning that when people saw him they were not seeing God. Again Jesus said that he can do nothing without God.

> I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees the Father do (Jn. 5:19).

> By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me (Jn. 5:30).

> I can do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me (Jn :28).

If Jesus was God he could do anything he wanted to do and in these passages and dozens of others he is making it as clear as crystal that he is one thing and God another. Jesus said, 'The Father is greater than I' (Jn. 14:28) emphasizing again that he was not as great as God and therefore different from him. He says:

> Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (Lk. 12:10).

Now if Jesus and the Holy Spirit were the same, to blaspheme one would be the same as blaspheming the other. In the Bible we are told that no one born of a woman can be pure (Job, 25:4). Jesus was born of a woman, his mother Mary, so he likewise must have been impure and if he was impure how could he be God? We are told that Jesus was dead for three days before ascending into heaven. How can God possibly die? Who was looking after the universe while he was dead? Jesus said that at the end of the world he would be sitting at the right hand of God to judge the world (Lk. 22:69). If Jesus and God are the same, how would it be possible for them to sit besides each other? To do this they would have to be separate and different. And anyway, David is described as sitting on the right hand of God so to do this one does not have to be anything other than a good human being (Ps. 110:1). We are told that Jesus stands between God and man.

> For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5).

This passage clearly states that Jesus is not God for if he was, how could he stand **between** God and men? It also specifically calls Jesus a man (see also Acts, 17:30-31). In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (Matt. 1:16, Lk 3:23) we are given the name of Jesus' father, his father's father, and so on, back through many generations. If God was really Jesus' father, why does the Bible list all Jesus' ancestors on his father's side? Christians are forever claiming that Jesus is God and at the same time that he is the son of God. But how is this possible? How can a father be his own son and himself all at the same time? And to make matters more confused, the Holy Spirit is brought in and we are asked to believe that Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit are all different and yet all the same. The Jewish and particularly the Islamic concepts of God are much more logical than this in that they say that God is unambiguously unitary and one, has no gender and he does not have children.

The claim of Christians that Jesus is God contradicts what the Bible says, it goes against common sense and it raises numerous logical and theological problems. Whereas if we see Jesus as he was, an outstanding teacher, reformer and prophet, none of these problems arise.

How did Jesus become God?

It seems inconceivable today that a mere human being could be regarded as a god but the situation was very different in the past. During the time of Jesus Israel was a land in political and social turmoil. Most people were ignorant and superstitious and wild rumors were readily listened to and believed. There were numerous people passing themselves of as prophets, messiahs, wonder workers and saviors of the Jewish nation. Some of these, like Simon Magus, were apparently able to perform miracles nearly the same as those done by Jesus (Acts, 8,9,ff). Others like Theudas and Judas the Galilean attracted large followings, again just as Jesus did (Acts, 5,36; Acts, 5,37). One of these characters even had

a name almost identical to Jesus (Acts, 13,6). When Paul and his companions healed a man in Lystra a huge crowd gathered and began worshiping them as gods. Paul was horrified and tried to explain that he and his friends were only humans but 'even these words could hardly keep the crowd from offering sacrifices to them' (Acts, 14,18). Most Roman emperors were considered divine after they died and temples were built to worship them in. Clearly this was a time when any charismatic person could attract a huge following and even be proclaimed a god. It happened to others and it happened to Jesus too.

Was Jesus Perfect?

If a religious teacher were perfect we would expect the behavior of such a person to be unfailingly blameless, their teachings to be humane and practical and there to be consistency between what they preached and how they behaved. Jesus of course, denied that he was perfect (Lk. 18:19) but despite this and all the evidence in the Bible, Christians continue to claim that he was. They have to do this because they mistakenly believe that he was God and how can one have an imperfect god? Buddhists believe that Jesus was a good man as were the founders of the other great world religions but because he was not enlightened like the Buddha he was certainly not perfect. Like other unenlightened people he sometimes did wrong, some of the things he taught were impractical and sometimes he failed to practice what he preached. Let us examine the evidence.

Jesus' ethical teachings are often described as sublime, lofty, utterly perfect, etc. But were they? Let us look at his teachings on divorce. In the Old Testament divorce was allowed under certain circumstances, which of course is the most humane thing to do when a couple no longer love each other. But Jesus took an extreme position on divorce saying that it was allowable only on the grounds of adultery:

> It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to commit adultery, and anyone who marries a woman so divorced also commits adultery (Matt. 5:31-32).

This terrible teaching has meant that in Christian countries until just recently millions of couples were trapped in unhappy loveless marriages because they were unable to get a divorce. It also meant that countless women who did manage to get a divorce from their husbands even without committing adultery were branded as adulterers if they married again. This teaching of Jesus alone has caused untold misery and heartbreak. Another example of Jesus' far from perfect teachings is his attitude to money. He seems to have had a deep resentment for the rich:

> But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger (Lk. 6:24-25).

While it is true that the rich are sometimes greedy and thoughtless (as are the poor sometimes) no mention is made of this. The rich are condemned simply because they are rich. Once when a young man pressed Jesus for an answer to the question of how he could have eternal life he finally said:

> If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give it to the poor and follow me and you will have treasure in heaven (Matt. 19:21).

He even went so far as to say that it is virtually impossible for a rich person to go to heaven.

> Truly, I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Again, I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God (Matt. 19:23-24).

Christians of course have never taken any notice of these sayings of Jesus but if they did the economies of most Christian countries would collapse and all the good qualities that honest entrepreneurship can engender would disappear. These rather impractical

and unfair ideas contrasts very sharply with the Buddha's attitude to wealth. He recognized that wealth honestly earned can be a source of goodness and happiness.

> What is the happiness of ownership? Herein, a householder has wealth acquired by energetic striving, won by strength of arm and sweat of brow, justly and lawfully won When he thinks of this, he feels happiness and satisfaction.
>
> And what is the happiness of wealth? Herein, a householder has wealth justly and lawfully won, and with it he does many good deeds. When he thinks of this, he feels happiness and satisfaction.
>
> And what is the happiness of freedom from debt? Herein, a householder owes no debt large or small to anyone, and when he thinks of this, he feels happiness and satisfaction (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Fives, Sutta No.41).

The Buddha also understood that with the right attitude the wealthy can do great good with their money.

> With wealth acquired by energetic striving, won by strength of arm and sweat of brow lawfully and justly, a noble disciple makes himself, his mother and father, his wife and children, his servants and workmen and his friends and acquaintances cheerful and happy — he creates perfect happiness. This is the first opportunity seized by him, used for good and appropriately made use of (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Fives, Sutta No.41).

So rather than dismissing the rich wholesale from the religious life as Jesus did the Buddha taught them to earn their money honestly and to use it for the benefit of themselves and the general community.

One aspect of Jesus teachings that many thoughtful people find disturbing is his depreciation of critical and independent thinking. He praised more highly those who believed without seeing than those who asked for evidence (Jn. 20,28). Once he said that unless a person becomes like a little child they cannot

enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18, 3) Small children are of course naïve, trusting and often believe anything they are told. But how are we going to separate truth from falsehood and right from wrong with an attitude like this. Is it wise to just blindly believe anything we are told? There are many false and even evil ideologies being promoted today and common sense demands that we scrutinize in a very adult manner before accepting them. The Buddha always encouraged people to make a careful and through inquiry before believing any ideas, including his own. When the Kalama's said that they didn't know how to choose between the various contending faiths he said to them; 'Do not go by revelation, tradition, rumor, or the sacred scriptures… But when you yourself know that a thing is good, useful and praised by the wise then accept and practice it' (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Threes, Sutta No 65).

Another problem with Jesus' as an ethical teacher is the numerous important moral issues he failed to give any guidance about. Slavery for example was an inhumane and widespread institution during his time and yet he is completely silent about it. He says nothing about racial discrimination, domestic violence, war or the problems of alcohol and drugs. Other crucial issues like how societies should be governed, the ethics of war, the administration of justice, the treatment of animals, economics or medical ethics are not addressed either. On the other hand there are numerous ideas that Jesus did teach which even the most enthusiastic fundamentalist or evangelical Christians would be reluctant to practice or even to agree with. He said that we should not resist those who do evil although most people today would say that not countering evil is the height of irresponsibility (Matt. 5,39). He taught that just to look at a woman with lust amounted to committing adultery which pretty much makes every male on earth an adulterer (Matt. 5,27). He said that if we call someone a fool in a moment of anger that we will be condemned to eternal

hell so presumably most of us are destined for the fiery furnace (Matt. 5,21). He said that poor people will always be with us which is hardly an incentive to try to eradicate poverty and depravation (Matt. 26,11). He even said that if we do wrong with our hand or our tongue that you should cut them off which seems extreme by any standards (Matt. 5; 30).

But the teaching of Jesus which has caused more problems than any other is his claim that he and he alone can give salvation (Jn. 14:6). It follows axiomatically from this that all other religions lead to the only alternative to salvation — hell — and are therefore evil. Sadly, this claim by Jesus is the root of that very characteristic Christian trait — intolerance. Christianity has always equated disbelief in Jesus with evil and has castigated non-believers as godless, wicked, stubborn, pagan, scoffers, followers of false prophets and idol worshippers

> Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? (2 Cor. 6:14-16).

In this passage Paul asks what a Christian can possibly have in common with, for example, a Buddhist. For Paul as for fundamentalist and evangelical Christians, the fact that the Buddhist may value and practice love, compassion, charity, patience, humility and truthfulness just as he himself does, counts for nothing. For the fundamentalist and evangelical Christian the single fact that the Buddhist does not believe in Jesus automatically puts him on the side of wickedness and darkness; he is an idol worshipper who should be shunned and who deserves to go to hell. This is the great tragedy of Christianity — the stronger the Christian's faith, the more partisan, bigoted and intolerant he usually becomes. What a relief it is to be able to Take Refuge in the Buddha and still be able to respect and admire Lao Tzu, Mahavira, the Prophet

Mohammed, Krishna, Kabir, Jesus, Guru Nanak, Confucius and other great religious teachers. How pleasant it is to be able to communicate with others without the need to be always trying to convert them. How nice it is to be able to be happy when one sees others happy with their religion. Fundamentalist, born-again and evangelical Christianity is intolerant because it is obsessed with Jesus and excludes everyone who does not accept him. Buddhism is tolerant because it treasures wisdom and compassion wherever they are found and it can embrace anyone who upholds these virtues.

Lack of Originality

Christians claim that Jesus' teaching of love and forgiveness, things that had never been taught before, is strong evidence of his uniqueness and divinity. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps Jesus' most famous sayings is 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Matt.22,39). This is a very beautiful saying and ethically a very important one but it is certainly not original. In uttering these words Jesus was doing nothing more than quoting Leviticus 19,18 which was written some four or five hundred years before his time. Everyone, even many non-Christians, know Jesus' so-called Golden Rule, 'Do to others what you would have them to do to you' (Matt.7,12). What most people do not know that an older contemporary of Jesus, the Jewish rabbi Hillel, taught almost exactly the same thing. 'What you do not like, do not do to your neighbor' (Sabbath,31.1). Even fewer people know that the Chinese sage Confucius taught the Golden Rule five hundred years before Jesus was even born. 'Zigong asked; "Is there a single saying that could be a guide for one's entire life?" The Master replied, "Do not do to others what you would not like done to you" (Lun Yu, 15,24). But not surprisingly, the first person to teach the Golden Rule was not Hillel or Confucius and certainly not Jesus but the Buddha. Although using a different formulation he taught exactly the same

idea in the Sutta Nipata,705 where he says; 'Thinking thus, "As am I so are others, as are others so am I," identify yourself with others and harm none or have them harmed.'

Christians like to usurp for Jesus uniqueness in teaching humility, non-retaliation and forgiveness and quote as proof of this his famous exhortation, 'If someone strikes you on the cheek turn the other cheeks' (Lk.6,29). But once again, the Buddha practiced and taught to his disciples these same values more than half a millenium earlier. In his famous Kakacupama Sutta he says;

> Even if bandits were to cut you limb from limb with a two-handled saw, if you had hatred towards them you would not be practicing my teaching. This is how you should train yourself, 'Our minds shall remain unaffected and we shall speak no evil words, we shall abide full of compassion for their welfare, with a mind void of hatred and filled with love. We shall abide radiating them with love and starting with them radiate the whole world with a love that is abundant, exalted, immeasurable and without hatred or ill will. This is how you should train yourselves. (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No 21).

The well-known Christian theologian Georgia Harkness in her book *Christian Ethics* says, 'Point for point, there is nothing in the teaching of Jesus which cannot be found in the Old Testament or in the rabbinical teaching.' There is nothing in it of an ethical nature than cannot be found in the Buddhist scriptures either. This is not to belittle Jesus as a moral teacher but merely to contradict the false Christian boast that he was the first person to teach love-based ethics and that this is proof that he really was the son of God.

Hell

Jesus taught at least two different ideas about what happens after death. According to the first when someone dies they will be judged and then assigned to either heaven or hell (Lk. 16,19-23). According to the second when people die they will remain in their graves until Jesus returns and only then come before him

to be judged. Clearly, he had no idea what would happen and was only speculating. However, Jesus was quite clear that hell is the only alternative to heaven, that all those who do not believe in him will go to hell and that hell is a place of unending punishment. Without any doubt this is the most unattractive of all Jesus' teachings. Behind all his gentleness and his exhortations to love and forgive lurks the terrible threat of eternal damnation. Most mainstream and liberal Christians are very uncomfortable with these ideas and try to make them sound a little better by rationalizing them. Firstly they will try to free Jesus or God from responsibility by saying that they do not send us to hell but that we send ourselves there by our evil actions. This flatly contradicts the Bible, which repeatedly says that the dead are judged before being assigned to hell. This judgment is not an automatic process but the result of a conscious decision on the part of Jesus or God. 'Your stubborn refusal to repent is only adding to the anger God will have towards you on that day of anger when his just judgment will be known' (Rom.2,5). In the Parable of the Ten Minas Jesus tells of a king who gave his servants a task to do and them went away. When he returned some of the servants had followed his instructions and some had not and at the conclusion of the parable Jesus has the king say; 'Those enemies of mine who do not want me to be king over them — bring them here before me and kill them' (Lk.19,27). The meaning of the parable is obvious, that Jesus will personally judge and punish those who reject him. In the Parable of the Weeds a farmer is told by his servants that weeds are growing in his crops and they ask if they should pull them out. But the farmer, who represents Jesus, says; 'Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters; First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned, then gather the wheat and bring it to my barn.' Again the meaning of the parable is plain enough, Jesus will order the punishment of non-believers and sinners.

Also, the Bible makes it clear that it is not primarily our actions that determine whether we go to heaven or hell but our beliefs. A Christian with considerable character flaws will go to heaven and an ethical and compassionate Buddhist will dammed for eternity. But not only will those who have failed to become Christians be punished, **even those who have never heard of Jesus will be flung into eternal hell.** According to the Bible, the truths of Christianity are so obvious that everyone should know them and if they don't, it is not because they are uninformed, but because they have deliberately chosen not to know them.

> 'The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what can be known about God is plain to them. For since the beginning of creation, God's invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so men have no excuse' (Rom.I,18-20).

This means that the overwhelming majority of people who have ever lived are in hell and most alive now will go there also. In 1960 the Congress of World Mission meeting in Chicago declared that 'in the years since World War II, more than a billion souls have passed into eternity and more than half of those went to the torment of hell fire without even hearing of Jesus Christ.' According to the authoritative *Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford, 2000, under 'Hell') 'the majority of human beings, most theologians agree, do end up in hell.'

The next way Christians try to explain away hell is by saying that it is not really a place of torture and punishment but of purification or separation from God. Again this directly contradicts the Bible. Jesus describes hell as an 'eternal fire that has been prepared by the Devil and his angles!' (Matt. 25, 41) and as a place of 'wailing and gnashing of teeth' where the dammed cry out for pity and for water to quench their burning thirst (Lk. 16, 24). Jesus even says that God's power to cast us into eternal hell should

make us utterly terrified of him.

> 'I tell you my friends, do not fear those who put to death the body and then can do no more. I will tell you who to fear. Fear He who after killing you is able to throw you into hell. This is who you should fear' (Lk. 12, 4-5).

The torture of sinners and unbelievers as described in the Revelations of John would have to be the most shocking piece of religious literature ever written. After relating how such people will be tortured for five months John gloats; 'They will long for death but death will be denied them' (Rev.9.5-6). To the Buddhist this and the many other Biblical passages about hell seem to demonstrate not as much love of sympathy as they should.

Another strategy is to say that all these passages about hell are not meant to be taken literally. But why not? If we take the idea of the vicarious suffering, the resurrection, salvation, the incarnation or the virgin birth on face value why shouldn't we do the same with the idea of eternal hell? Why are Christians so ready to endorse some of Jesus' ideas but so reluctant to even acknowledge others? Of course the reason for this is very clear. To the modern civilized mind the concept of eternal hell for all non-Christians seems vindictive, vengeful, cruel and unjust. Mainstream and liberal Christians are embarrassed to admit that Jesus could have conceived such a monstrous idea, despite all the evidence that he did. Evangelical and born-again Christians are far less squeamish about hell than their liberal brethren. They are only too happy to proclaim the reality of eternal hellfire and are quick to tell you that this will be your fate too if you do not believe in Jesus. In this sense they are less pleasant than liberal Christians but at least more true to what Jesus taught.

Miracles

One of the most bizarre things about Jesus were the miracles he is said to have performed. The most famous of these was bringing

Lazarus back from the dead. Lazarus had been dead for at least four days and was presumably in heaven, while his family were heartbroken and grieving. In raising him from the dead, Jesus certainly demonstrated his power but what did Lazarus and his family get out of it? Lazarus was removed from heaven and brought back to 'this vale of tears' only to have to die all over again some time in the future, while his family would have to go through grieving and distress all over again (Jn. 11:1-44). To the Buddhist this miracle, if it even really happened, seems to be unnecessary and even cruel. How much more practical and humane was the Buddha's approach to death. On one occasion a young mother named Kisagotami came to the Buddha with her dead son, deranged with grief and pleading with the Buddha to give her son some medicine. Full of compassion the Buddha told her to go and get a mustard seed from a house where no one had ever died. In the process of looking for such a seed, Kisagotami gradually came to realize that death is an integral part of life and she overcame her grief (Dhammapada Atthakatta, Book 8,13). Jesus performed showy miracles which seemed to leave people much as they were. The Buddha gently and skillfully helped people to understand and accept the reality of death. This is what the Buddha meant when he said that education is the highest miracle (Digha Nikaya, Sutta No.11).

Another miracle where Jesus seems to have given little thought to the consequences of what he was doing was the one he supposedly performed at Godara. A man was possessed by devils and just before Jesus exorcised them these devils asked him to send them into a nearby herd of pigs. Jesus obliged, sending the devils into the pigs, which then rushed screaming down the side of a cliff and into a lake where they all drowned (Mk. 5:1-13). The possessed man must have been very grateful for this but one wonders what the owners of the pigs would have thought. The loss of their animals would have caused them great financial hardship. Not

surprisingly, we are told that after this incident the people from the nearby village came to Jesus and begged him to leave their territory (Mk. 5:17). Note that Matthew tells this same story but he exaggerates it, claiming that not one but two men were exorcised (Matt. 8:28-32).

This supposed miracle also highlights Jesus utter disregard for nature. He could simply have expelled the devils but instead he chose to do it in a most cruel way by driving to their deaths a large number of completely harmless and innocent animals. On another occasion he used his miraculous powers to kill a fig tree simply because it could not bear fruit (Matt. 21:18-20). Apparently he never considered that animals could have eaten its leaves, birds could have nested in its branches, travelers could have rested in its shade and its roots would have helped prevent erosion of the soil by the rain and wind — which probably explains why the tree had been left growing. No advantage at all came from killing the tree — it was little more than an act of wanton vandalism.

While some of Jesus' miracles were pointless others seem to have verged on the ridiculous. We are told that once Jesus was invited to a wedding. After some time there was no wine left to drink so he turned several large jars of water into wine (Jn. 2:1-11). No doubt the host must have appreciated not having to go out to buy more alcohol, but it does seem a bit incongruous that God should incarnate as a human, come to earth and use his powers just so that people wouldn't run out of drinks at their parties.

Inconsistency

What we have said above indicates that while some of Jesus' teachings were good, others were cruel, impractical and in some cases just silly. And perhaps it is not surprising that not only have Christians often failed to practice Jesus' teachings, but he often failed to practice them himself. He taught that we should love our neighbor but he seems to have problems doing this himself. He

believed that his teaching could lead people to heaven and yet he specifically instructed his disciples not to preach the Gospel to anyone but his own people, the Jews.

> Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6).

When a poor distressed woman came to Jesus begging for help he refused her simply because she was not Jewish. Teaching the Gospel to Canaanites was, he said, like taking food from children and throwing it to dogs.

> A Canaanite woman from the vicinity came to him, crying out, 'Lord, son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession'. Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, 'Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us'. He answered: 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel'. The woman came and knelt before him, 'Lord, help me'! she said. He replied, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs' (Matt. 15:22-26).

It was only after strong urging from his disciples that he finally decided to help the woman. So much for loving one's neighbor. Jesus taught that we should love our enemies, but again he seemed to have difficulties doing this. When the Pharisees criticized him he responded with a tirade of curses and insults (e.g. Jn. 8:42-47, Matt. 23:13-36). Jesus said that we should not judge others (Matt. 7:12) and claimed that he himself judged no one (Jn. 8:15). But despite this he was constantly judging and condemning others, often in a harsh and sweeping manner (Jn. 8:42-47, Matt. 23:13-16). In conformity with the Old Testament Jesus taught that we must honor our mother and father (Matt. 19:19) but on other occasions he taught and practiced the exact opposite.

> If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple (Lk. 14:26).

This demand that to love Jesus we must be prepared to hate others,

even our own parents, seems to be very much at odds with the idea of honoring parents — let alone with the idea of loving our neighbor. Once Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him while he was preaching only to be rudely rebuffed.

> And his mother and brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him, and they said to him, 'Your mother and brothers are outside, asking for you'. And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers'? And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, 'Here are my mother and brothers'! (Mk. 3:31-35).

Once when his mother spoke to him, Jesus snapped at her, 'O woman, what have you to do with me ?' (Jn. 2:4). And yet while he acted like this to his parents he condemned the Pharisees for their supposed hypocrisy over the law requiring that parents be honored (Matt. 15:3-6, Mk. 7:10-13).

In some instances, it is difficult to accuse Jesus of failing to practice what he preached for the simple reason that he taught contradictory things. Christians are used to thinking of him as 'gentle Jesus meek and mild,' because of his commands 'to turn the other cheek' and to 'not resist an evil.' And indeed Jesus seems to have acted like this sometimes. But at other times he clearly saw his role as a violent one.

> Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace but the sword. I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, a man's enemies will be the members of his own household (Matt. 10:34-36).

Certainly he saw nothing wrong with using violence when he thought it was necessary. When he saw the money changers in the temple he lost his temper and lashed out with violence.

> So he made a whip out of cords and drove all from the temple areas: he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables (Jn. 2:15).

Before his arrest Jesus was expecting trouble so he told his disciples to prepare themselves by getting weapons.

> If you do not have a sword sell your cloak and buy one (Lk. 22:36).

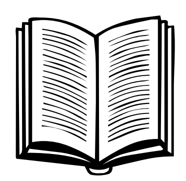
When he was arrested there was a fight during which 'one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear' (Matt. 26:51). It is very difficult for the Buddhist to reconcile such behavior with the idea of being perfect. To retaliate against one's accusers, to lose one's temper and to encourage others to carry weapons and use them seem to negate the whole idea of moral perfection.

Christians have great difficulty understanding why Buddhists and other non-Christians cannot accept Jesus as their Lord and savior as they themselves do. But when we read the life and teachings of the Buddha — a man who smiled at abuse, remained calm when provoked and who always discouraged violence — the reason for their rejection becomes clear.

How Buddhists See Jesus

Clearly there is much in the life and teachings of Jesus that a Buddhist would disagree with but equally as much he or she could admire. So how do informed Buddhists see Jesus? Firstly, they think of him as a great moral teacher on a par with Confucius, Mahavira, Kabir, Lao-Tzu, Krishna or Guru Nanak. His teachings that evokes most admiration in Buddhists is his stress on humility, love and service to others. These ideas are very similar to what the Buddha taught some five hundred years earlier and strike a cord with all Buddhists. Jesus said that the greatest love is to give ones life for ones' friend (Jn. 15, 13) and the Buddha taught exactly the same thing (Digha Nikaya, Sutta 31). When Jesus said, 'In that you did it for the least of these my brothers you did it for me' (Matt. 25; 40) we immediately think of the Buddha's words 'He who would nurse me let him nurse the sick' (Vinaya,

Mahavagga,VIII,25). Secondly, Buddhists have the highest respect for Jesus' honesty and integrity. However inadequate and confused his ideas might have been in some way there can be no doubt that he was utterly sincere and believed deeply in what he was doing. Lastly, Buddhists sees Jesus as being worthy of their sympathy and compassion. The accounts of his betrayal, his torture, his trial and finally the terrible manner of his death are deeply moving and evoke genuine sorrow in all Buddhists. They cannot accept the Christian claim that Jesus was God and as we have seen, there is little evidence that he himself ever made this claim. But some other claims made about him fit into Buddhist doctrines very well. According to Buddhism all good people can be reborn in the heaven realm. Jesus was clearly a good person, a very good person, and so Buddhists agree when the Bible says he went to heaven after his death. Buddhist also agrees with the Bible when it says that Jesus will come again. When his life span in heaven is over he may well be reborn on earth again and continue his mission with even more love and wisdom than before. Perhaps in time he may develop sufficient wisdom to become a bodhisattva and eventually a Buddha.



A Critique of The Bible

Christianity is a book-based religion. There is no evidence for the claims of Christianity other than what is said in the Bible and this fact alone makes this book the bedrock of Christian doctrine and faith. Today as in the past evangelical and fundamentalist Christians have picked through the Bible arguing with each other over the meaning of its phrases and words and have tried to convince non-Christians of the truth of a book that they themselves cannot agree about. But one thing which all Christians agree about is that the Bible is God's word — not that it contains God's word, but that it is God's word; an infallible and complete revelation given to man by God. We will examine this claim and see if it has any truth to it.

Is it God's Word?

If the Bible really is God's word it indicates that he is a very strange deity indeed. One would expect that the creator of the universe would only speak to humans when he had something of great importance to say and that what he said would be of universal significance. Not so. The book of Chronicles for example consists of little more than lists of names of people we know little or nothing about and who died thousands of years ago. No commandments, no ethical principles, no hints on how to live properly or to worship God — just page after page of useless names. Why would God waste his and our time revealing such things? And what about the Songs of Solomon? This book consists of a collection of erotic love poetry. Once again, with the world in such a mess one would have supposed that God could have thought of something more important to say to humankind than this.

Then we come to the Gospels which recount the life of Jesus. Why has God decided to reveal the whole of Jesus' biography, not

once, but four times and why has he revealed what are very clearly four different and contradictory versions of the same story? Unlike fundementalist and born-again Christians, historians have given perfectly plausible answers to these questions. The Bible is not a revelation from God, it is a compilation, a rather untidy compilation, written by many different people, over many centuries, changed and edited from time to time and containing legends, stories, genealogies, fables, sacred and secular writings. It is no more a revelation from God than are the Iliad or the Odyssey, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata or the Epic of Beowulf.

Is the Bible Inspired?

Christians claim that although the books of the Bible were actually written by different people, these people were inspired and guided by God as they wrote. While contemporary Christians make this claim, the ancient authors of the Bible never did. For example, Luke says at the beginning of his Gospel;

> Insomuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us… it seemed good to me also having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you… (Lk. 1:1-3).

Nothing about being filled with the spirit of God either before or while he wrote, he simply says that others had written accounts of the life of Jesus so he thought it might be a good idea if he wrote something also. If he was really inspired by God to write his Gospel why didn't he mention it? But the claim of inspiration is not just unsubstantiated, it also raises a very serious problem. Evangelical and born-again Christians are always claiming that God speaks to them in prayer, that he gives them advice and tells them what to do. They claim that God's voice is very direct, very clear and very real. But if they really have no doubt that God is communicating with them then surely his words should be recorded and included in the Bible. The Bible contains words

God spoke to Moses, Joshua, Matthew, Mark, Peter and Paul so why shouldn't the words he speaks to modern day Christians be included also? Christians will balk at such a suggestion which indicates that they are not so convinced that the words they hear in their hearts really do come from God after all.

One Bible or Several?

In ancient times there was no standardized version of the Old Testament. Different Jewish groups and different regions had their own versions. There were the Septuagint, the Aquila, Theodotion's version and Symmachu's version, all containing different text and different numbers of books. The Old Testament used by modern Christians is based on the Massonetic version which only appeared after the Jamnia Synod at the end of the 1st century AD. The New Testament did not appear in its present form until the year 404 AD, nearly four hundred years after the death of Jesus. Before that time, the Gospels of Thomas, the Gospel of Nicodemus, the Acts of Peter, the Acts of Paul and a dozen other books were all considered canonical. In 404 AD these books were simply cut out of the Bible because they contained teachings that were contrary to Christian theology at that time. One of the oldest existing copies of the Bible, the Codex Sinaiticus, includes the Epistle of Barnabas, a book that is not found in the modern Bible. If these books were considered to be revelation from God by early Christians why don't modern Christians consider them to be so?

When we look at the Bibles used by modern Christians we find that there are several different versions. The Bible used by the Ethiopian Church, one of the most ancient of all churches, contains the Books of Enoch and the Shepherd of Hermas which are not found in the Bibles used by Catholics and Protestants. The Bible used in the Catholic Church contains the books of Judith, Tobias, Banuch, etc which have been cut out of the Bible used in Protestant churches. Prof. H.L. Drummingwright of the Southwestern

Baptist Theological Seminary in his introduction to the Bible explains how these books came to be removed from the Protestant Bible. These books were, he says, 'in most Protestant Bibles until the 19th century, when publishers, led by the British and Foreign Bible Society voluntarily began to omit them.' Once again, these books contained ideas which the churches did not like so they just censured them. How can a book like Judith be the infallible word of God one moment and not the next? Why are there so many different versions of God's supposed infallible word? And which of these different versions of God's word the real one?

Are There Mistakes in the Bible?

We have seen previously that there are many mistakes in the Bible but we will have a look at three more examples of its inaccuracies. Today, even schoolchildren know that the earth moves; it moves on its axis and at the same time it moves around the sun. We also know that the tectonic plates on the earth's surface move. The Bible however, clearly states that the earth does not move. In 1 Chronicles 16:30 the it says, 'The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved' (See also Ps 93:1, 96:10 and 104:5). It was these very verses that the Christian church used to condemn Galilio in the 16th century for saying that the earth moved around the sun.

Here and in many places, the Bible contradicts scientific fact. But the Bible does not just contradict science it also contradicts itself. Let us have a look at the creation story. In the first book of the Bible it says that God created all the plants and trees on the third day (Gen. 1:11-13), all birds, animals and fish on the fifth day (Gen. 1:20-23) and finally, man and woman on the sixth day (Gen. 1:26-27). Yet a little further on the Bible gives a different version of the creation story saying that God created man first (Gen 2:7), then all plants and trees (Gen 2:9), after that all birds and animals (Gen 2:19) and only then did God create woman (Gen 2:21-22). These two versions of the creation story contradict

each other. Now let us have a look at the story of Noah's Ark. In one place in the Bible we are told that Noah took two of every animal and put them in the ark (Gen. 6; 19). But later the Bible says Noah took seven pairs of all clean animals and birds and two of all other creatures and put them in the ark (Gen. 7:2). Again the Bible is contradicting itself. Fundamentalist Christians will object to all this saying that these and the numerous other mistakes in the Bible are only small and of no significance. However, only one mistake is required to show that the Bible is not infallible. Further, if mistakes can be made in small matters they can be made in important matters. And finally, one mistake is proof either that the Bible is not the word of God or that God is capable of mistakes.

Is the Bible Reliable Testimony?

We have seen that the Bible is not infallible and therefore cannot be a genuine revelation. So if it is not God's word whose word is it? Many of the books in the Bible are named after the people who are supposed to have written them. So the Gospel of Matthew is supposed to have been written by Matthew, one of the disciples of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark is supposed to have been written by Mark, another of Jesus' disciples and so on.

Christians could claim that even if the Bible is not necessarily an infallible revelation it is the testimony of reliable people, They could claim that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John knew Jesus well, they lived with him for several years, they heard his teachings and they wrote down what they saw and heard and that there is no reason for them to lie or exaggerate. Therefore, Christians could claim that the Bible is reliable testimony. However, for testimony to be reliable it must come from reliable people, trustworthy people, people from good backgrounds. Were the disciples of Jesus such people? Let us look. Some of Jesus' disciples were tax collectors (Matt. 9:9), a dishonest and despised class with a well-earned reputation for corruption (Matt. 18; 17); others were mere illiterate

fishermen (Mk. 1:16-17). Simon was a Zealot (Lk. 6:15), a group of men known for their fanatical and often violent opposition to Roman rule and like many people involved in illegal politics he used an alias and was also known as Peter (Matt. 10:2). Peter and James were given the nicknames Boanerges meaning 'sons of thunder' (Mk. 3:17) once again suggesting their involvement in violent politics. When Jesus was arrested his disciples were carrying swords and were willing to use them (Matt. 26:51). Hardly the sort of people with whom we would feel comfortable.

Another thing that should make us wary of trusting the testimony of Jesus' disciples is that they seemed to be constantly misunderstanding what Jesus was saying (Mk. 4:13, 6:52, 8:15-17, 9:32; Lk. 8:9, 9:45). Further, they are supposed to have seen Jesus perform the most amazing miracles and yet despite this they still had doubts about him. If even the people who knew and saw Jesus didn't believe how we could who have never seen him be expected to have faith in him? Jesus scolded his disciples and called them 'men of little faith' (Matt. 8:26, 17:20). Should we trust the writings of men who constantly failed to understand what was being said to them and whom even Jesus called men of little faith? How unreliable and faithless the people who wrote the Bible were is best illustrated by what they did just prior to and during Jesus' arrest. He asked them to keep watch but they fell asleep (Matt. 26:36-43). After Jesus was arrested they lied and denied that they even knew him (Mk. 14:66-72), and after his execution they simply went back to their fishing (Jn. 21:2-3). And who betrayed Jesus in the first place? His disciple Judas (Matt. 26:14-16). Association with sinners, liars, traitors and fools in order to help them, as Jesus did, is a good thing. But should we believe everything such people say?

An even more disturbing thing about Jesus' disciples is just how many of them were possessed by demons or devils from time to time. Mary Magdalene who later claimed to have seen Jesus rise from the dead, had been possessed by seven devils

(Mk. 16:9). Satan entered into Judas (Lk. 22:3), tried to get into Simon (Lk. 22:31) and Jesus once actually called his chief disciple Peter 'Satan' (Matt 16:23) suggesting that he too was possessed by a devil at the time. Whether possession by devils actually happens or whether it indicates serious psychological disorders as modern psychiatrists believe, either way it indicates that we should treat the words of Jesus' disciples with great caution.

Who Did Write the Bible?

We have seen that the Bible is not infallible, that it cannot be a revelation and that it is not the testimony of reliable, trustworthy people. We will now show that the Bible was not even written by the people who are supposed to have written it. Let us have a look at the first five books in the Bible; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These five books describe the creation of the world, God's first revelation to humanity and the early history of the tribe of Israel and are supposed to have been written by Moses. They are in fact, often called 'The Books of Moses.' However, his authorship is clearly impossible because in these books we have an account of Moses' death.

> So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab according to the word of the Lord, and they buried him in the valley in the land Moab opposite Beth Peor, but no man knows the place of his burial to this day (Deut. 34:5-6).

How could a person write an account of his own death and burial? The book of Deuteronomy at least, must have been written by someone other than Moses.

Now let us have a look at the New Testament. The Gospel of Matthew is supposed to have been written by Matthew (tax collector, doubter, man of little faith), one of the disciples of Jesus. Yet we can easily demonstrate that Matthew could not have possibly have written this Gospel. We read:

> As Jesus passed on from there he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office and he said to him, "Follow me". And he rose and followed him (Matt. 9:9).

Neither now nor in the past do people write in the third person. If Matthew had really written this we would expect it to read:

> As Jesus passed on from there he saw **me** sitting at the tax office and he said to me, "Follow **me**". And **I** rose and followed him.

Obviously this was not written by Matthew but by some third person. Who this third person was we do not know but Bible scholars have made a guess. In the preface to his translation of the Gospel of Matthew the distinguished Bible scholar J.B. Phillips says:

> Early tradition ascribes this Gospel to the apostle Matthew but scholars nowadays almost all reject this view. The author, who we still can conveniently call Matthew has plainly drawn on a collection of oral traditions. He has used Mark's Gospel freely, though he has rearranged the order of events, and has in several instances used different words for what is plainly the same story.

This is a deeply disturbing admission especially coming from an eminent Christian Bible scholar. We are told that 'almost all' modern Bible scholars reject the idea that the Gospel of Matthew was actually written by Matthew. We are told that although the real author is unknown it is 'convenient' to keep calling him Matthew. Next we are told that whoever wrote the Gospel of Matthew has 'freely' copied much of his material from the Gospel of Mark. In other words, the Gospel of Matthew is just a plagiarism where material has been 'rearranged' and restated in 'different words.' So apparently in the Gospel of Matthew not only don't we have the words of God, we don't even have the words of Matthew. To their credit, Bible scholars like Prof. Phillips freely admit these and other major doubts about authorship of the Bible but such admissions make the claim that the Gospels were written by the disciples of Jesus clearly untrue.

Mistakes and Variations in the Bible

If we look at the bottom of the pages in most Bibles we will find many notes. These notes indicate mistakes, variations or doubtful readings in the text of the Bible and there are literally hundreds of them. Some of the mistakes or variations consist of only a few words but some of them are long passages (see for example the notes to Luke 9:55-56; John 5:3; Acts 24:6; 1 Corinthians 8:36-38; 11:4-7; 2 Corinthians 10:13-15). Also notice that the notes to Mark 16:9-20 mention that this long passage is not found in the ancient copies of the Bible. In other words, this long passage was added at a later time and has now been removed. How can evangelical, born-again and fundamentalist Christians honestly claim that their Bible is infallible and without mistakes when all the mistakes are listed at the bottom of each page?

In the New Testament Jesus and his disciples often quote the Old Testament in order to make a point or more usually, to attempt to prove that the Old Testament prophesizes events in the life of Jesus. But when we compare these quotes with the original text of the Old Testament we find that they are almost always different. We will use here the New International Version of the Bible.

OLD TESTAMENT

> But you, Bethlehem Ephasthah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old (Mic. 5:2).

NEW TESTAMENT

> But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel (Matt. 2:6).

This quotation from the Old Testament in the New Testament contains not just different words, it also changes the meaning of the original. Has Matthew misquoted the Old Testament because

he was not familiar with it and made a mistake? Has he deliberately misquoted in order to alter the meaning? Or was the Old Testament Matthew used different from the one we have today? The New Testament quotes the Old Testament dozens of times and hardly a single quote is accurate. Christians will protest and say that these changes are only minor and of no importance. Perhaps so, but these are proofs that the Bible does contain mistakes, contrary to what Christians say. Further, if it is true as Christians claim that the authors of the New Testament were inspired by God as they wrote it is very strange that they couldn't even quote the Old Testament accurately.

Removing Verses from the Bible

Just before his death Jesus taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer and since that time generations of Christians have learned this prayer by heart. But anyone who memorized it twenty years ago will have to learn it again because the Lord's Prayer has been changed. We will compare the original Lord's Prayer found in all Bibles until about twenty years ago with the Lord's Prayer now in the New International Version of the Bible to show that Christians have even tampered with this most important teaching of Jesus.

King James Version

> Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

The New International Version

> Father, hallowed is your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation (Lk. 11:2-5).

Notice that these phrases — 'who art in heaven,' 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,' 'but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen' — have been removed from the Lord's Prayer. Next time a Christian tries to evangelize you ask him or her why these verses have been cut out of the most famous and important of all Jesus' teachings. Ask them which of these two different versions of the Lord's Prayer is the infallible, unchanging word of God. Ask them who had knowledge and wisdom enough to tamper with the Bible. Do not let them change the subject. Insist on an answer. You will find that they have great difficulties answering these questions. Here as elsewhere, the reader is encouraged to go to a library or bookshop, find different versions of the Bible and carefully compare them. You will see with your own eyes how much the Bibles differ as the result of tampering, censuring and careless mistakes.

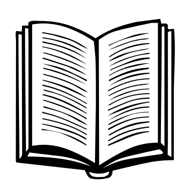
Proof that the Bible has been tampered with is found on nearly every page if one looks carefully. The text of the Bible is arranged into chapters which in turn are divided into verses. As you read you will sometimes notice that one or two verses have mysteriously disappeared. For example notice that verses 44 and 46 have been deleted from chapter 9 of the Gospel of Mark. Notice also that verse 37 has been cut out of chapter 8 of Acts and verse 28 has been removed from chapter 15 of Mark. How can evangelical, fundamentalist and born-again Christians honestly claim that their Bible is the infallible and unchanging word of God when they cut out inconvenient verses and words?

We know from history that during the first two centuries of Christianity forged Gospels, fake sayings of Jesus and spurious epistles were very common. People cut bits out of the Bible or added bits to it according to what they thought it should say. In one place in the Bible Paul warned his readers that someone was forging letters claiming to be written by him (2 Thess.2.2). In an-

other place there are dire threats against anyone tampering with the text of the Bible (Rev.22,18-9). We know for a fact that the first 11 verses in the 8th chapter of the Gospel of John was added later, because it is not found in any of the earliest copies of the Bible and it is not quoted by any early Christian writers. With so much forging and faking, chopping and changing it is impossible to know who really wrote the Bible and what Jesus really said.

Selective Interpreting

Whenever fundamentalists want to convince us of the truth of their religion they will quote from the Bible believing as they do that every word of it is literally true. But when we quote from the Bible to show that some aspects of their religion are silly or illogical (e.g. that smoke comes out God's nose and fire comes out of his mouth, Ps. 18:7-8; or that donkeys can talk, Num 22:28) the they will say: 'That's symbolic, its not meant to be taken literally.' Fundamentalist Christians are very selective in how they interpret the Bible. Some passages are God's word and literally true and other parts, usually the embarrassing parts, are not meant to be taken literally. Either the Bible is God's infallible word or it is not, one cannot pick and choose. And if indeed some passages are meant to be taken literally and others are not, how do fundamentalists decide which is which? If the stories about Balaam's donkey talking, Adam and Eve eating the apple or Moses turning his stick into a snake are not meant to be taken literally, then perhaps the story of Jesus' resurrection are only symbolic and not meant to be taken literally.



Buddhism — The Logical Alternative

> If you have no satisfactory teacher, then take this sure Dhamma and practice it. For Dhamma is sure and when rightly undertaken it will be to your welfare and happiness for a long time.

The Buddha

Christianity is based upon certain supposed historical events (the virgin birth, the resurrection, etc), the only record of which is an allegedly reliable document called the Bible. If these events can be shown to have never occurred or if the documents recording these events can be shown to be unreliable, then Christianity will collapse. In this book we have shown that Christian claims are at best highly doubtful and at worst demonstrably wrong. When we examine the teachings of the Buddha we find an entirely different situation. Even if we were able to prove that the Buddha never existed or that there are mistakes in the Buddhist scriptures this would not necessarily undermine Buddhism. Why is this? Because Buddhism is not primarily about the historical Buddha or about events which happened in the past; rather, it is about human suffering, what causes that suffering, and how it can be overcome so that humans can be free, happy and radiant. If we wish to understand or verify Buddhism we would not have to flick through scriptures squabbling about the meaning of various words or phrases. Rather, we become sensitive to our own experience. Let us examine the four principles which are the doctrinal basis of Buddhism.

When we die we are reborn

Christians believe that when people die they have only one of two possible destinies — heaven or hell. They believe that these

destinies are eternal and that one goes to one's destiny according to God's judgement. Buddhism teaches that when people die they can have a variety of destinies; heaven, hell, the spirit realm, as a human being, as an animal, etc. It teaches that none of these destinies is eternal and that having finished one's life span in one of these realms one will die and pass to another. It also teaches that one's destiny is conditioned by one's kamma, that is, the sum total of the good or bad that one has done during one's life. This means that all good people, no matter what their religion, will have a favorable destiny. It also means that even those who have done evil will have a chance to become good in some future life.

Christians scoff at the idea of being reborn and say that there is no evidence that such a thing happens. But the idea of rebirth is not that different from what they believe. If people can become angels in heaven after death, why can't they become humans on earth? And as for evidence, there is certainly no evidence for the Christian afterlife theory while there is at least some evidence that people can be reborn (see *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville U.S.A., 1975).

Life is suffering

The next principle upon which Buddhism is based is the idea that ordinary existence is suffering. Although Christians accuse Buddhists of being pessimistic for saying this, life's inherent unsatisfactoriness is confirmed by the Bible: 'In the world you will have tribulation' (Jn. 16:33); 'Man is born to trouble as sparks fly upwards' (Job 5:7); 'All things are full of weariness' (Ecc. 1:8); 'the earth mourns and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth' (Is 24:4). But while the Bible agrees with the Buddha on this matter the two disagree on why suffering exists.

Christianity relies on what is plainly a myth to explain the origin of evil and suffering, claiming that they are due to Adam and

Eve disobeying God. Buddhism sees suffering as a psychological phenomenon with a psychological cause — wanting, craving and desire. And our experience tells us that this is so. When we want something and cannot get it we feel frustration and the stronger the wanting the stronger the frustration. Even if we get what we want we soon grow tired of it and begin to want something else. Even physical suffering is caused by craving because the strong craving to live causes us to be reborn and when we are reborn we become subject to sickness, accidents, old age, etc. Buddhism says that even the bliss of heaven is impermanent and imperfect, a fact again confirmed by the Bible. The Bible tells us that Satan was originally a heavenly angel but that he rebelled against God (i.e. he was dissatisfied) and was cast out of heaven (i.e. existence in heaven need not be eternal). If having been in heaven one can fall from that state this proves that heaven is not perfect and everlasting as Christians claim (see Is. 14:12-15; II Pet .2:4; Jude, 6; Rev. 12:9).

Suffering can be overcome

The third principle upon which Buddhism is based is the idea that it is possible to be free from suffering. When craving and wanting stop, one's life becomes more content and happy and at death one is no longer reborn. This state of complete freedom from suffering is called Nirvana and is described by the Buddha as being 'the highest happiness' (Dhammapada 203). Christians often mistakenly think that Nirvana is a blank nothingness and accuse Buddhism of being nihilistic. This misunderstanding arises because of their inability to conceive of an afterlife more subtle than their own naive heaven — a place 'up there' (Ps. 14:2, 53:2) with doors and windows (Gen. 28:17, Rev. 4:1, 2 Kg. 7:2, Mal. 3:10), where God sits on a throne (Rev. 4:2) surrounded by angles in beautiful gowns with crowns on their heads playing trumpets (Rev. 4:4). The Buddha categorically said that Nirvana is not nihilistic.

> When one has freed the mind, the gods cannot trace him, even though they think: "This is the consciousness attached to the enlightened one (Buddha)." And why? It is because the enlightened one is untraceable. Although I say this, there are some recluses and religious teachers who misrepresent me falsely, contrary to fact, saying: "The monk Gotama (Buddha) is a nihilist because he teaches the cutting off, the destruction, the disappearance of the existing entity." But this is exactly what I do not say. Both now and in the past, I simply teach suffering and the overcoming of suffering (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No.22).

But the Buddha also said that Nirvana is not the crude 'eternal life' like the one described in Christianity. It is an utterly pure and blissful state which no conventional language can adequately describe.

Christians sometimes claim that Buddhism contradicts itself because in wanting to attain Nirvana one is strengthening the very thing which prevents one from attaining it. This point was raised at the time of the Buddha and answered by one of his chief disciples, Ananda.

> A priest asked Venerable Ananda: 'What is the aim of living the holy life under the monk Gotama'? — "It is for the sake of abandoning desire." — 'Is there a way, a practice by which to abandon this desire'? — 'There is a way — it is by means of the psychic powers of desire, energy, thought and consideration together with concentration and effort'. — 'If that is so, Venerable Ananda, then it is a task without end. Because to get rid of one desire by means of another is impossible'. — 'Then I will ask you a question; answer as you like. Before, did you have the desire, the energy, the thought and consideration to come to this park? And having arrived, did not that desire, that energy, that thought and that consideration cease'? — 'Yes, it did." — "Well, for one who has destroyed the defilements, once he has won enlightenment, that desire, that energy, that thought and that consideration he had for enlightenment has now ceased' (Samyutta Nikaya, Book Seven, Sutta No. 15).

There is a way to overcome suffering

The last of the four principles which form the basis of Buddhism

tells us how to eliminate craving and so we can become free from suffering both in this life and in the future. The first three principles are how the Buddhist sees the world and the human predicament while the last principle is what the Buddhist decides to do about it. And the Buddhist response to suffering is to walk the Noble Eightfold Path. This practical and universally valid system of training comprises the development of Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. We will look briefly at each of these steps.

Right Understanding

If we persist in believing that evil and suffering are due to something Adam and Eve once did or that they are caused by devils, we will never be able to overcome them. When we come to understand that we inflict suffering upon ourselves through our ignorance and craving we have taken the first step in overcoming that suffering. Knowing the true cause of a problem is the beginning of solving it. And it is not sufficient to just believe — we must try to understand. Understanding requires intelligence, careful observation, weighing up the facts and openness.

Right Thought, Speech and Action

The next three steps on the Noble Eightfold Path embody Buddhism's ethical teachings. Christians often try to give the impression that theirs are the only ethics which revolve around gentleness, love and forgiveness. The truth is however that 500 years before Jesus the Buddha taught a love-centered ethic as good as and in some ways more complete than that of Christianity. To practice Right Thought we must fill our minds with thoughts of love and compassion.

> Develop a mind full of love, be compassionate and restrained by virtue, arouse your energy, be resolute and always firm in making progress (Theragatha, 979).

> When with a mind full of love one feels compassion for the whole world — above, below and across, unlimited everywhere, filled with infinite kindness, complete and well-developed; any limited actions one may have done do not remain lingering in one's mind (Jataka 37,38).

> Just as water cools both good and bad and washes away all dirt and dust, in the same way you should develop thoughts of love to friend and foe alike, and having reached perfection in love you will attain enlightenment (Jataka Nidanakatha, 168-169).

In practicing Right Speech we should use our words only in ways which promote honesty, kindness and peace. The Buddha described Right Speech like this.

> If words have five characteristics they are well-spoken, not ill-spoken, neither blamed nor condemned by the wise, they are spoken at the right time, they are truthful, they are gentle, they are to the point, and they are motivated by love (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Fives, Sutta 198).

With a beauty and comprehensiveness typical of the Buddha he describes the person who is trying to develop Right Speech like this.

> Giving up lying, one becomes a speaker of the truth, reliable, trustworthy, dependable, not a deceiver of the world. Giving up slander, one does not repeat there what is heard here, or repeat here what is heard there, for the purpose of causing divisions between people. Thus, one is a reconciler of those who are divided and a combiner of those already united, rejoicing in peace, delighting in peace, promoting peace; peace is the motive of his speech. Giving up harsh speech, one speaks what is blameless, pleasant to the ear, agreeable, going to the heart, urbane, pleasing and liked by all. Giving up useless chatter, one speaks at the right time, about the facts, to the point, about Dhamma and discipline, words worthy of being treasured up, seasonable, reasoned, clearly defined and connected to the goal (Digha Nikaya, Sutta No.1).

Right Action requires that we avoid killing, stealing and sexual misconduct and practice gentleness, generosity, self-control and helpfulness towards others.

Right Livelihood

To practice Right Livelihood one will do work which is ethically wholesome and which produces something that does not harm society or the environment. An employer will pay his workers fairly, treat them with respect and make sure their working conditions are safe. An employee on the other hand will work honestly and diligently (see Digha Nikaya, Sutta No. 31). One should also use one's income responsibly — providing for one's needs, saving some and giving some to charity.

Right Effort

Christian beliefs about God and man make human effort inconsequential. Humans are by nature depraved and evil sinners.

> How can man be righteous before God. How can he who is born of a woman be clean? (Job, 24:4).

> The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt (Jer. 17:9).

Being nothing more than a maggot (Job, 25:6) humans are incapable of being good and cannot be saved through their own efforts but only by the grace of God. Buddhism by contrast, sees human nature as primarily good and in the right conditions more likely to do good than evil (Milindapanha, 84). In Christianity humans are held responsible for the evil they have done throughout their lives but they are also held responsible for and likely to be punished for the sins of Adam and Eve. In Buddhism people take responsibility only for their own actions and, as human nature is basically good, this means that effort, exertion and diligence are of great importance. The Buddha says:

> Abandon wrong. It can be done. If it were impossible to do, I would not urge you to do so. But since it can be done, I say to you: Abandon wrong. If abandoning wrong brought loss and sorrow, I would not urge you to do so. But since it conduces to benefit and happiness, I urge you: Abandon

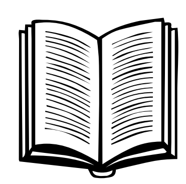
> wrong. Cultivate the good. It can be done. If it were impossible to do, I would not urge you to do so. But since it can be done, I say to you: Cultivate the good. If cultivating the good brought loss and sorrow, I would not urge you to do so. But since it conduces to benefit and happiness, I urge you: Cultivate good (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Twos, Sutta No. 9).

Right Mindfulness and Concentration

The last two steps on the Noble Eightfold Path jointly refer to meditation, the conscious and gentle practice of firstly coming to know the mind, then controlling it and finally transforming it. Although the word meditation occurs about twenty times in the Bible, it to refer only to the simple practice of ruminating over passages from the scriptures (e.g. Josh. 1:8). The Bible seems to be completely devoid of the sophisticated meditation techniques found in the Buddhist scriptures. Consequently, when Christians are plagued by evil desires or troubled by stubborn negative thoughts about all they can do is pray harder. This absence of meditation is also the reason why fundamentalist and evangelical Christians so often appear agitated and lacking in that quiet dignity characteristic of Buddhists. God says, 'Be still and know that I am God' (Ps. 46:10) but evangelical Christians can't seem to sit still, let alone still their minds, for a moment. God also says 'Commune with your own heart on your beds and be still' (Ps. 4:4) which is exactly what Buddhists do when they meditate. But evangelical and born-again Christian prayer meetings often seem to resemble a rock concert in a lunatic asylum, with the pastor shouting and wildly gesticulating while the people in the congregation sway back and forth, 'speak in tongues,' writhe, weep and clap their hands. Besides, fundamentalist Christians are usually too busy running around trying to convert others to find time to sit still and look into their own hearts.

The great advantage of Buddhism is that it not only advises us to be calm, peaceful, free from unruly desires and self-aware but it

also shows us how to develop these states. There are meditations to induce calm, to modify specific mental defilements, to encourage positive mental states and to change attitudes. And of course when the mind is calm and free from prejudices, preconceived ideas and distorting passions it is more likely to see things as they really are. It is not surprising that many of the meditation techniques taught by the Buddha are now being used by psychologists, psychiatrists and counselors.



How to Answer the Evangelists

Evangelical, fundamentalist and born-again Christians often ask Buddhists questions with the intention of confusing or discouraging them. They see this as the first step in destroying their confidence in Buddhism and converting them to Christianity. We will look at some of these questions and comments and give effective Buddhist responses to them.

You do not believe in God so you cannot explain how the world began.

It is true that Christianity has an explanation about how everything began but is this explanation correct? Let us examine it. The Bible says that God created everything in six days and that on the seventh day he rested. This quaint old story is nothing but a myth and is no more true than the Hindu myth that the gods created everything by churning a sea of milk or the classical belief that the universe hatched out of a cosmic egg. Some parts of the creation myth are plainly absurd. For example, the Bible says that on the first day God created light and darkness but only on the fourth day did he create the sun (Gen 1:15-16). How can there be day and night, light and darkness without the sun? This creation myth also contradicts modern science which has proven how the universe began and how life evolved. There are no departments of astronomy or biology in any of the world's universities which teach the creation myth for the simple reason that it is not based on fact. So while it is true that Christianity has an explanation for how everything began it is nothing more than a quaint old legend.

Then what does Buddhism sat about how everything began? Buddhism has little to say on this subject and for a very good

reason. The aim of Buddhism is to develop wisdom and compassion and thereby attain Nirvana. Knowing how the universe began can contribute nothing to this task. Once a man demanded that the Buddha tell him how the universe began. The Buddha said to him 'You are like a man who has been shot with a poison arrow and who, when the doctor comes to remove it, says, 'Wait! Before the arrow is removed I want to know the name of the man who shot it, what clan he comes from, which village he was born in. I want to know what type of wood his bow is made from, what feathers are on the end of the arrow, how long the arrows are, etc etc". That man would die before all these questions could be answered. My job is to help you to remove the arrow of suffering from yourself' (Majjhima Nikaya Sutta No. 63, paraphrased).

Buddhism concentrates on helping us solve the practical problems of living — it does not encourage useless speculation. And if a Buddhist did want to know how and when the universe began he would ask a scientist.

Buddhism is impractical because it says you cannot even kill an ant.

Before we defend Buddhism against the charge of being impractical, let us see if Christianity is practical. According to Jesus if someone slaps us on the cheek we should turn the other cheek and let them slap us there also (Matt 5;25). If we discover that someone has stolen our pants we should go out and give the thief our shirt as well (Matt 5:40). If we ourselves cannot resist stealing we should cut off our hands (Matt 5:30). We could call all these teachings impractical although Christians would probably prefer to call them challenging. And perhaps they would be right. To turn the other cheek when someone assaults us is not easy. It requires that we control our anger and doing this helps to develop patience, humility, non-retaliation and love. If we are never challenged we will never grow. The Buddha asked us to have

respect for all life, even for humble creatures. As with turning the other cheek, this is not always easy. Creatures such as ants can be an irritating inconvenience. When we take the Precept not to kill and try to practice it we are challenged to develop patience, humility, love, etc. So in asking us to respect all life, Buddhism is no more impractical than Christianity and it is certainly more compassionate.

The Buddha is dead so he cannot help you.

Buddhists sometimes have difficulty responding effectively when fundamentalist Christians say this to them. However, if we know Dhamma well it will be quite easy to refute it because like most Christian claims about Buddhism, it is based upon misunderstandings.

Firstly, the Buddha is not dead, he has attained Nirvana, a state of utter peace and freedom. The other name the Buddha gives Nirvana is the Deathless State *(amita)* because after one attains it one is no longer subject to birth or death. Of course Nirvana is not the naive eternal life described in the Bible where the body is resurrected and where angels sing. In fact it is so subtle that it is not easy to describe. However, it is not non-existence as the Buddha makes very clear (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No.72; Sutta Nipata, 1076).

It is equally untrue to say that the Buddha cannot help us. During his forty year career he explained in great detail and with masterly clarity everything we need to attain Nirvana. All we need to do is to follow his instructions. The Buddha's words are as helpful and as valid today as when he first spoke them. Of course the Buddha doesn't help us in the same way as Christians claim Jesus helps them and for a very good reason. If a student knew that during the exams he could ask the teacher for the answers to the exam questions he would never study and consequently would never learn. If an athlete knew that by merely asking for it the judge would give him the prize, he would never bother to

train and develop his body. Simply giving people everything they ask for does not necessarily help them. In fact, it guarantees that they will remain weak, dependent and lazy. The Buddha pointed us to Nirvana and told us what provisions we would need for the journey. As we proceed, we will learn from our experiences and our mistakes, developing strength, maturity and wisdom as we proceed. Consequently, when we finish our journey we will be completely different persons from when we started. Because of the Buddha's skilful help we will be fully enlightened.

So when Christians say they that the Buddha can not help us this is quite wrong. But it also implies two things: that Jesus is alive and that he can and will help us. Let us look at these two assumptions. Christians claim that Jesus is alive but what evidence is there of this? They will say that the Bible proves that Jesus rose from the dead. Unfortunately, statements written by a few people thousands of years ago don't prove anything. A statement in the Mahabharata (one of the Hindu holy books) says that a saint had a chariot which could fly. But does this prove that the ancient Indians invented the airplane? Of course it does not. The ancient Egyptian scriptures say that the god Khnum created everything out of clay which he shaped on a potters wheel. Does this prove that everything which exists is just mud? Of course it does not. A passage in the Old Testament even says that a man named Balaam had a donkey which could talk. Is that conclusive evidence that animals can speak? Of course it is not. We cannot uncritically accept claims made in the Bible any more than we can uncritically accept claims made in other sacred books. When we examine Bible claims about Jesus' supposed resurrection we find very good reasons why we should not believe them. In fact, the Bible actually proves that Jesus is not alive. Just before he was crucified he told his disciples that he would return before the last of them had died (Matt 10:23, Matt 16:28, Lk 21:32). That was two thousand years ago and Jesus

has still not returned. Why? Obviously because he is dead.

The second assumption is that Jesus always responds when you pray to him. It is very easy to prove that this is not true. Christians die from sickness, suffer from misfortunes, have emotional problems, give in to temptations etc just as non-Christians do and despite the fact that they pray to Jesus for help. I have a friend who had been a devout Christian for many years. Gradually he began to doubt and he asked his pastor for help. The pastor instructed him to pray and even got members of the church to pray for him. Yet despite all these prayers to Jesus for strength and guidance my friend's doubts increased, he eventually left the church and later became a Buddhist. If Jesus is really alive and ready to help why do Christians have just as many problems as non-Christians do? Why didn't Jesus answer my friend's prayers and help him to remain a Christian? Obviously because he is dead and unable to help. There is even evidence in the Bible that he cannot help people. Once Jesus appeared to Paul and promised that he would protect him from both the Jews and the pagans (Acts.26, 17) but we know that Paul was eventually executed by the Romans. Why didn't Jesus protect Paul despite his promise to do so? Obviously because he is dead and can't help.

In answer to this objection Christians will say that there are people who can testify that their prayers have been answered. If this is true, it is also true that there are Muslims, Taoists, Sikhs, Hindus, Jews, and even the follows of tribal religions who can say the same thing.

Buddhists Worship Lifeless Idols

This is of course an old slander that Christians have always flung at Buddhism and indeed at all non-Christian religions. Buddhists do not worship idols, they use the Buddha statue as a symbol and as a focus of attention much as Christians use a cross. To Christians idolatry is 'an inordinate desire that places any object,

person, institution or ideology as the recipient of man's ultimate concern and affection' and their objection to idolatry is that 'God cannot be contained in forms fashioned by humans' (O. Barfield, *Saving the Appearance — A Study of Idoltary,* 1957). But while fundamentalist Christians are quick to accuse all other religions of idolatry many of them are guilty of idolatry themselves — the idolatry of words. Is this not what evangelical pastors do when they hold the Bible up in the air as they shout out their sermons. Are they not committing idolatry when they bless the sick by placing the Bible on their head. They accuse others of trying to contain God in man-made forms while they contain him in man-made words — dry, dusty old words which they quibble over, argue about, quote in every situation as if they are talismans. If it is true that others worship wood and stone it is equally true that fundamentalist, evangelical and born-again Christians worship ink and paper.

But quite apart from this, what is wrong with depicting God in human form ? Isn't this exactly what God did when he came to earth as Jesus; put himself in human form, take on material shape? And when a woman anointed Jesus with perfume was she not worshipping God in material form, i.e. Jesus' body? And did not Jesus praise her for doing this ? (Matt.26,6).

Unlike Christianity, Buddhism is so pessimistic

According to *Webster's Dictionary*, pessimism is the belief that evil in life outweighs the good. It is interesting that Christians accuse Buddhism of being pessimistic because the idea that evil is more pervasive than good is one of the central doctrines of Christianity. Two of the fundamentalist Christians favorite Bible quotes are, 'All have sinned, all have fallen short of God's glory' (Rom 3:10) and 'Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins' (Ecc 7:20). The doctrine of Original Sin teaches that all human beings are sinners, incapable of freeing themselves of

sin and that the evil in us is stronger than the good (Rom 7:14-24). Christians will say that while this is true we can be free from sin if we accept Jesus. This may be so but it is still the case that Christians feel they need Jesus because their view of human nature is so utterly negative and pessimistic.

Buddhism on the other hand has a very different not to say more realistic view of human nature. While fully recognizing humankind's potential for evil, Buddhism teaches that we can conquer evil and develop good through our own efforts.

> Abandon evil! One can abandon evil! If it were impossible to abandon evil, I would not ask you to do so. But as it can be done, therefore I say, Abandon evil! Cultivate the good! One can cultivate what is good! If it were impossible to cultivate the good I would not ask you to do so. But as it can be done, therefore I say, Cultivate the good! (Anguttara Nikaya, Book of Ones).

Whether one agrees with this belief or not, one could certainly not say that it is pessimistic.

Jesus teaches us to love but Buddhism encourages us to be cold and detached.

This is not true. The Buddha says that we should develop a warm caring love towards all living beings.

> Just as a mother would protect her only child even at the risk of her own life, even so one should cultivate unconditional love to all beings (Sutta Nipata, 150)

In every sense love is as important in Buddhism as it is in Christianity and is emphasized just as much. There is however something which somewhat spoils the fundamentalist Christians' practice of love. Their loud insistence that only they love, that the quality of their love is superior to that of others and their constant disparagement of and scoffing at others' efforts to practice love, makes them appear thoroughly invidious. So petty and jealous are some evangelical and born-again Christians that they cannot

acknowledge or appreciate a quality as beautiful as love if non-Christians practice it.

Unlike Buddhism, Christianity is mainly a religion of love. The Bible says, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that men may not die but have eternal life.'
This is a lovely saying but to a thinking person it only seems to highlight the limitations and inadequacy of God's love. Why didn't God's love the world so much that he simply forgave mankind for its supposed sins? Then everyone could been saved and it would not have been necessary for Jesus to come to earth and be tortured and executed. According to Hinduism, Vishnu manifests himself on earth again and again to help and to save humans. Why didn't God love the world so much that he sent his son numerous times to give as many people as possible the chance of salvation? Why doesn't God love the world so much that he eliminates disease, disaster and poverty and allows humans to live in peace and happiness? Why doesn't God love the world so much that he stops tsunamis or at least warns people that they are going to happen? We are told that sinners and non-believers go to hell for eternity. Why doesn't God's love the world so much that he punishes the souls in hell for a few centuries, then forgive them and lets them enter heaven? If his ability to forgive is finite then his love must be finite too?

You claim that when we die we are reborn, but there is no proof of this.
Before responding to this claim let us examine both the Christian and Buddhist after-life theories. According to Christianity, God creates a new soul, which becomes a human being, lives its life and then dies. After death the soul will go to eternal heaven if it believed in Jesus or to eternal hell if it did not. According to

Buddhism, it is impossible to fathom the ultimate beginning of existence. Each being lives its life, dies and then is reborn into a new existence. This process of dying and being reborn is a natural one and can go on forever unless the being attains Nirvana. When a being does attain Nirvana in this life their understanding and consequently their behavior alters and this changes the process, which causes rebirth. So instead of being reborn into a new existence the being attains final Nirvana. Nirvana is not existence (to exist means to respond to stimuli, to grow and decay, to move in time and space, to experience oneself as separate, etc.) and it is not non-existence in that it is not annihilation. In other words each being's existence is beginningless and endless unless Nirvana is attained and until that time existence has no other purpose than to exist.

There is little evidence for either of these two theories. However, there are several logical and moral problems with the Christian theory which are absent from the Buddhist theory and which make the latter more acceptable. Christianity sees existence as having a beginning but no end whereas Buddhism sees it as cyclic. Nature offers no examples of processes, which have a beginning, but no end. Rather, all the natural processes we observe are cyclic. The seasons go and return again next year. Rain falls, flows to the sea, evaporates and forms clouds which again fall as rain. The body is made up of the elements we ingest as food; when we die the body breaks down and releases its elements into the soil, where they are absorbed by plants and animals which we again eat to build the body. The planets circle the sun and even the galaxy containing our solar system slowly revolves. The Buddhist theory of rebirth is in harmony with the cyclic processes we see throughout nature whereas the Christian theory is not.

Christians claim that God created us for a purpose — so we can believe in him, obey him and be saved. If this is so it is very difficult to explain why each year millions of unborn babies naturally

abort and millions of other babies are born dead or die within the first few days, months or years of their lives. Further, millions of people are born and live their whole lives with severe mental retardation, unable to think even the most simple thoughts. How do all these people fit into God's supposed plan? What purpose can God have in creating a new life and then letting it die even before it is born or soon after its birth? And what happens to all these beings? Do they go to eternal heaven or eternal hell? If God really created us with a plan in mind, that plan is certainly not very obvious. Further, as the majority of the world's people are non-Christian and as not even all Christians will be saved, this means that a good percentage of all the souls that God creates will go to hell. God's supposed plan to save everyone seems to have gone terribly wrong. So although we can't prove either the Christian or the Buddhist afterlife theory, the Buddhist doctrine is more appealing and acceptable.

If we are really reborn, how do you explain the increase in the world's population?

When beings die they are reborn but they are not necessarily reborn as the same type of being. For example, a human could be reborn as a human, as an animal, or perhaps as a heaven being, according to its kamma. The fact that there is a dramatic increase in the world's human population indicates that more animals are being reborn as humans (there has been a corresponding drop in the number of animals due to extinction etc.) and more humans are being reborn as humans. Why is this so? Just why more animals are being reborn as humans is difficult to say. But why more humans are being reborn as humans is undoubtedly due to an increasingly widespread knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. Even where the Dhamma is not widely known its capacity to be a subtle influence for good is powerful. All this can account for the increase in the human population.

Nirvana is an impractical goal because it takes so long to attain and so few can do it.

It is true that attaining Nirvana may take a long time but on the other hand rebirth gives us plenty of time. If one does not do it in this life one can continue striving in the next life. In fact, it will take as long as one wants. The Buddha says that if one really wants, one can attain Nirvana within seven days (Majjhima Nikaya, Sutta No.10). If this is so, the Christian will ask, why haven't all Buddhists already attained Nirvana? For the simple reason that mundane phenomena still hold an attraction for them. As insight and understanding gradually make that attraction fade one moves step by step, at one's own pace, towards Nirvana. As for the claim that only a few people can attain Nirvana, this is not correct. While in Christianity a person has one and only one chance of being saved, Buddhism's teachings on rebirth mean that a person will have an infinite number of opportunities to attain Nirvana. This also implies that everyone will eventually be liberated. As the Buddhist text says

> This immortal state has been attained by many and can be still attained even today by anyone who makes an effort. But not by those who do not strive (Therigatha, 513).

In Christianity, history has a meaning and is moving towards a particular goal. Buddhism's cyclic view of existence means that history has no meaning and this makes Buddhists fatalistic and indifferent.

It is true that according to Buddhism history is not moving towards any climax. But the person who is walking the Noble Eightfold Path certainly is. He or she is resolutely moving towards the peace and freedom of Nirvana.

> Just as the river Ganges flows, slides, tends towards the east, so too one who cultivates and makes much of the Noble Eightfold Path flows, slides, tends towards Nirvana (Samyutta Nikaya, Great Chapter, Sutta No.67)

So it is not true to say that Buddhism's more realistic view of existence and history necessarily leads to indifference. And what climax is history moving towards according to Christianity? The Apocalypse, where the vast majority of humanity and all the works of humanity will be consumed by brimstone and fire. Even the lucky few who are saved will have the gloomy prospect of an eternity in heaven knowing that at least some of their family and friends are, at the same time, being punished in hell. It would be difficult to imagine a more depressing future to look forward to than this.

The Buddha copied the idea of kamma and rebirth from Hinduism.

Hinduism does teach a doctrine of kamma and also reincarnation. However, their versions of both these teachings are very different from the Buddhist versions. For example, Hinduism says we are determined by our kamma while Buddhism says kamma only conditions us. According to Hinduism, an eternal soul *(atman)* passes from one life to the next while Buddhism denies that there is such a soul (anatman) saying rather that it is a constantly changing stream of mental energy that is reborn. These are just two of many differences between Hinduism and Buddhism on kamma and rebirth.

However, even if the Buddhist and Hindu teachings were identical this would not necessarily mean that the Buddha unthinkingly copied the ideas of others. It sometimes happens that two people, quite independently of each other, make exactly the same discovery. A good example of this is the discovery of evolution. In 1858, just before he published his famous book *The Origin of the Species,* Charles Darwin found that another man, Alfred Russell Wallace, had conceived the idea of evolution exactly as he had done. Darwin and Wallace had not copied each other's ideas; rather, by studying the same phenomena they had come to the

same conclusion about them quite independently of each other. So even if Hindu ideas about kamma and rebirth were identical to those of Buddhism (which they are not) this would still not be proof of copying. The truth is that Hindu sages, through insights they developed in meditation, got vague ideas about kamma and rebirth, which the Buddha later expounded more fully and accurately.

If Buddhist is such a good religion why did it die out in India, the land of its birth?

We could well ask the same question of Christianity. 'If the teachings of Jesus are so good why is Christianity now only a minor religion in Israel, Palestine and Turkey, the lands of its birth ?' We could even ask, 'If Jesus was really the Prince of Peace why are Israel and Palestine probably the most violent regions in the world?' Of course a Christian would answer that things change, that with the advent of Islam many Christians in the Middle East changed their religion so that Christianity nearly disappeared. And the same is true of Buddhism in India. Due to complex political, economic and social reasons many Indians who had been Buddhists gradually became Hindus. The fact that Buddhism disappeared in India does not prove that it is inadequate in any way any more than Christianity's decline in the Middle East proves that it is inadequate.

Jesus forgives our sins, but Buddhism says you can never escape the consequences of your kamma.

It is only partially true that Jesus forgives sins. According to Christianity, after people are created they will live forever — first for a few decades on earth and then for eternity in either heaven or hell. Jesus will forgive people's sins while they live in the world but for the rest of eternity he will refuse to do so, no matter how frequently or how pitifully the souls in hell may call upon his

name. So Jesus' forgiveness is very conditional, it is limited to a minute period of time in a person's existence after which he will withhold it. So most people will never escape from the consequences of their supposed sin.

Can Buddhists escape from their kamma? The doctrine of kamma teaches that every intentional action *(kamma)* has an effect *(vipaka).* However, this effect is not always equal to its cause. For example, if a person steals something this act will have a negative effect. If however, after the theft the person feels remorse, returns the stolen article and sincerely resolves to try to be more careful in the future, the negative effect of the theft may be mitigated. There would still be an effect although not as strong. But even if the thief does not mitigate the wrong which he has done with some good, he will be free from the deed after its effect comes to fruition. So according to Buddhism we can be free from our kamma while according to Christianity our sins will only be forgiven during an extremely limited period of time.

There are other ways in which the doctrine of kamma is better than the Christian ideas of sin, forgiveness and punishment. In Buddhism while one may have to endure the negative effects of the evil one has done (which is only fair) this means that one will experience the positive effects of the good one has done as well. This is not so in Christianity. A non-Christian may be honest, merciful, generous and kind yet despite this at death this person will go to hell and not receive any reward for the good he has done. Further, according to the doctrine of kamma, the effects we experience, all things being equal, are in direct proportion to their cause. This is not so in Christianity — even if a person is exceptionally evil during this life, eternal hell is an utterly disproportionate punishment. How much more is this so if is the person is good but not Christian? Indeed, the eternity of hell and the idea that all non-Christians are condemned to it, are teachings that cast very serious doubts on the concept of a just and loving God.

Jesus is the man you cannot ignore. Your book is just another example of this.
Do not attribute your own feelings to others! Several billion Buddhists and people of other faiths live their lives quite happily while ignoring Jesus! Most of them never even give him a thought! And if there are Buddhists who pay some attention to Jesus it is not because he, his teachings or the claims about him are so challenging, but rather because evangelical Christians keep pushing him into everyone's face. They 'market' that humble and gentle man as if he were a brand of toothpaste or a washing powder.

Deep down Buddhists are really searching for God and the peace only he can give.
This is a good example of the rather silly things fundamentalist and even a few mainline Christians sometimes say. It is also a completely meaningless claim. One could simply reverse it and assert, 'Deep down Christians are really searching for Nirvana and the peace only it can give.' The only thing such statements show is that Christians are incapable accepting the reality that the majority of the world's population are not Christians and are never going to become Christians. Evangelicals console themselves over this truth by convincing themselves that all who reject Jesus will go to hell and be punished as they richly deserve. Moderate Christians console themselves by saying that Buddhists are really searching for God but haven't found him yet.

Christianity started with a few simple men and within three hundred years had become the main religion of the Roman Empire. How could it have spread so far and so fast if it had not been a part of a divine plan?
Communism started as one unemployed man sitting in the British Library and within sixty five years of his death had become the philosophy that nearly one third of humankind lived by. The

bizarre cult of Mormonism started with a former con-man claiming that he received a golden book from an angel and now it is one of the fastest growing Christian churches. The Prophet Mohammed was an illiterate merchant and within two hundred years his religion stretched from India to Spain and gave rise to a rich and sophisticated civilization. The Buddha was a simple ascetic who owned nothing and within two centuries his Dhamma had spread throughout India and beyond. The fact that Christianity spread quickly and widely proves nothing. Many religions have done the same.

Christianity has spread to almost every country in the world and has more followers than any other religion, so it must be true.
It is true that Christianity has spread widely but how has this happened? Until the 15th century Christianity was largely confined to Europe. After this, European armies spread throughout the world forcing their religion on the people they conquered. In most conquered countries (e.g. Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Mexico, Taiwan and parts of India) laws were passed banning all non-Christian religions. By the late 19th century brute force was no longer used to enforce belief but under the influence of the missionaries, colonial administrators tried to hinder non-Christian religions as much as possible. Today the spread of Christianity is supported by lavish financial assistance which missionaries get largely from the U.S.A. So the spread of Christianity has nothing to do with its supposedly superior doctrine but because of fear, power and money.

Whether Christianity is the world's largest religion is a matter of definition. Can we consider the Mormons, the Moonies, the Lord's Army and the Jehovah's Witnesses to be real Christians? Can we consider the numerous strange cults and sects that flourish in South America and Africa and which account for many millions of people, to be real Christian? Most Protestants don't

even consider Catholics to be genuine Christians! If we deny that all the heretical, heterodoxist, cultic, bizarre and loony Christian groups are 'real' Christians, this would probably make Christianity one of the smallest religions in the world. This would also explain why the Bible says that only 144,000 people will be saved on Judgement Day (Rev 14:3-4).

Modern archaeology has proved that the Bible is true.
This is a good example of the half-truths that evangelical and fundamentalist Christians often use to try to impress uninformed people and convert them. It is true that the Bible contains a great deal of historical information. For example, the Book of Joshua tells us that the Israelites laid siege to the city of Jericho but they could not penetrate its strong walls. God told them to march around the city seven times playing trumpets, then give a loud shout, and the walls would collapse. The Israelites did as they were instructed, the walls fell down and the city was captured (Josh.6,2-27). Archaeologists have excavated the ruins of Jerhico and have discovered that it did indeed have walls that had collapsed at one time. But they have not found an iota of evidence that this happened because of trumpet-playing Israelites and the intervention of God. On the country, the evidence shows that the walls and much of the rest of the city was destroyed by an earthquake. None of this proves the existence of God — all it shows is that ancient people mistakenly believed that natural phenomena were the doings of a divine being.

And if the Bible contains some historically accurate information, so do the sacred scriptures of most religions. The Holy Koran, the Mahabharata and the Jain scriptures are all filled with topographically and historically correct information. Some sacred scriptures even contain geologically correct data. The Swayambhu Purana says that the Kathmandu Valley used to be a lake until the Bodhisattva Manjusri cut the mountains with a sword

and let the water out. Amazingly, geologists have now proved that the Kathmandu Valley was a lake during the Pleistocene period and that all the water eventually drained out through the Chobhar Gorge. The Buddhist scriptures also contain a great deal of information that has been verified by archaeologists. They tell us that the Jatavana, a monastery where the Buddha used to stay, was just outside the walls of Rajagaha. Archaeologists have shown that this is correct. In one of his very few prophecies the Buddha said that the village of Patali would grow into a great city but that it would be prey to floods, fire and civil strife (Digha Nikaya, Sutta No 16). Archaeology and history have proved that the Buddha was correct. Within two hundred years Palali had become the capital of Asokan empire and during excavation of parts of the city archaeologists found thick layers of silt and ash, showing that at some time the city has endured a great flood and a great fire.

God blesses those who believe in him. That is why Christian countries are so rich and Buddhist countries are so poor.

Of all the arguments that fundamentalist Christians use to try to incise people into becoming Christian this is by far the most foolish. Firstly, if what the Bible says about wealth is true (Matt. 19:23-24) it would seem that the blessings which God has supposedly poured out on Europe and America are really a curse in disguise. Secondly, if prosperity is really proof of God's favor it would seem that he really likes the Muslims because he has given them all the oil. Thirdly, some Christian countries such as Honduras and the Philippines are extremely poor while Japan, predominantly a Buddhist country, is very rich. And finally, by making statements like this, fundamentalist and born-again Christians are letting slip their real motive for worshipping God — desire for money. Buddhism for its part teaches that qualities like contentment, love, gentleness and inner peace are more precious than money.

Christianity has been a force for progress while Buddhism has done little to improve the world.

In Christianity's long history there has been much to be proud of and perhaps equally as much to be ashamed of. Take for example slavery, a terrible institution that almost all churches supported until the 19th century. After Paul converted the runaway slave Oresimus he convinced him that as a Christian he should go back to his master (Philemon 1:3-20). Paul asked the master to be kind to Oresimus but he did not ask him to free his slave. The Bible says that slaves should obey their masters even if they are treated with cruelty.

> Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, single-mindedly, as if serving Christ (Eph. 6:5)

> Slaves, give entire obedience to your earthly masters, not merely with an outward show of service, to curry favor with men, but with single-mindedness, out of reverence for the Lord (Col. 3:22)

> Bid slaves to be submissive to their masters and give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to be refractory, nor to pilfer, but to show entire and true fidelity so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our savior (Tit. 2:9-10)

The reason why slave owners in Africa, U.S.A, Cuba and Brazil encouraged their slaves to become Christians was because it made them passive and obedient. In England the campaign to abolish slavery in the 19th century was strongly opposed by the churches as they opposed similar campaigns in Mexico, Brazil and the southern U.S.A. (for details read the section on 'Slavery' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics,* 1989).

Take science. The development of science in the West was retarded by church opposition (see *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom,* A.D. White, 1960). Christian opposition to dissection of corpses held back the development of medicine and anatomy for three hundred years. The churches

were against dissection because they believed that it would make bodily resurrection impossible. The church was opposed to the heliocentric view of the universe and even threatened to torture and execute Galileo for saying that the earth moved around the sun. When Benjamin Franklin invented the lightning rod which prevented buildings from being damaged by lightning, Protestant clergymen were in an uproar. They believed that God would no longer be able to punish sinners by hurling thunder bolts at them. When chloroform was invented the churches refused to allow it to be used to alleviate the pain of childbirth. The Bible teaches and they believed that the pain of childbirth is God's punishment on women for the sin of Eve (Gen 3:16).

Take the persecution of the Jews. Of all the black pages in the history of Christianity this is the blackest and most disgraceful. For two thousand years Christians have harassed, hounded, humiliated and murdered the Jews simply because they refused to believe in Jesus. In this respect Protestants have been no better than the Catholics. In 1986 a leading Protestant clergyman in the U.S.A. said 'God does not listen when the Jews pray.' Martin Luther, the founder of Protestant Christianity, wrote a book called *The Jews and their Lies* in which he advocated extreme persecution of Jews on the grounds that they did not believe in Jesus. It is not surprising that the Nazis encouraged the publishing and distribution of Luther's book during the time they ruled Germany. Just imagine it! On this matter the hate-monger Joseph Goebbels and the Protestant pastor Martin Luther were of one mind.

We could go on but perhaps this is enough. However, since the 19th century it is true that many Christian churches have begun to eagerly adopt the outlook of the liberal secular tradition and make it their own. So now Christians are often in the forefront of movements for justice, democracy and equality. But there is little in the Bible that they can use to justify their actions. On the contrary, the Bible specifically says that all rulers, even the unjust,

get their power from God and to oppose them is to oppose God.

> Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore he who resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment (Rom 13:1-2, see also Jn 19:11, Tit 3:1, Pet 2:13, Prov 8:15-16)

For centuries despotic kings, cardinals and bishops quoted passages like these to justify their rule. Liberation theologies are very silent about such Bible passages today. The best Christian social philosophy doesn't come from the Bible. It comes from the Western secular tradition which the churches spent four hundred years opposing. Now they try to pretend that these values originate from Jesus (see *What the Bible Really Says,* ed. M. Smith and R.S.Hoffman, 1989).

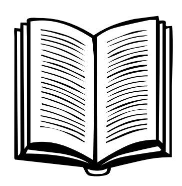
Buddhism has always been less aggressive and less organized than Christianity. This has meant that its influence on society has been subtle, less noticeable and even perhaps less dynamic than it should have been. On the other hand it has also meant that the witch-hunts against heretics, the persecution of non-believers and the bloody religious wars that have marred Christian history, have been rare or absent in Buddhism.

I have been to many Buddhist countries and I saw little of the noble philosophy you are talking about. All I saw was the worship of malevolent spirits, monks practicing astrology, belief in the protective power of amulets and talismans and numerous other vulgar superstitions.

It is interesting that you should say this because I have been to the United States, widely acknowledged to be a deeply Christian country, and I saw little of the noble teachings Jesus talked about. I saw televangelists making constant pleas for money while drawing huge salaries and living in opulence mansions. I read about Jimmy Baker, the famous preacher, being sentenced to forty

years imprisonment for fraud and tax evasion. I was interested to hear that Jimmy Swaggard, one of the country most well known preachers lost his position when it was discovered that he visited prostitutes and read pornography. I was amazed to discover that the Mormons believe that you can be married for eternity, that you must not drink tea and that every Mormon family must keep a large stock of food in preparation for the end of the world. I traveled through the Deep South and found that it is the most pious people who are the most racist. White people go to white churches and black people go to black churches. But beyond all this scandal, hypocrisy and shenanigans the thing that I noticed most about American Christianity was the inextricable association between God and money. Christians seem to think that achieving worldly success, wealth, adulation and getting what you want is the first and only Commandment. Perhaps it might be a good idea to clean up your own mess before you start pointing the finger at the failings of Buddhists. Jesus said it best when he advised, 'You hypocrites! Remove the log from your own eye before you instruct your neighbor on who to remove the splinter from his eye.'

Buddhism may be a noble philosophy but if you look at Buddhist countries you notice that few people seem to practice it.
Perhaps! But is it not exactly the same in Christian countries? What honest Christian can say that all Christians fully, sincerely and with deep understanding follow Jesus' teachings? Let us not judge a religion by those who fail to practice it.



Conclusion

What has been written so far may have stimulated in the reader the desire to know more about Christianity and Buddhism and so we will briefly recommend some books for further reading. A popular and easy to read book exposing many of the fallacies in Christianity is *Jesus — the Evidence* by Ian Wilson, 1984. Wilson examines the history of the Bible and shows how scholars have demonstrated beyond doubt that it is an untidy compilation composed over several centuries. He also shows how the man Jesus gradually came to be seen as a god. Another good book is *Rescuing the Bible from the Fundamentalists* by John Spong, 1991. Spong is a Christian bishop and scholar who freely admits that much of what the Bible contains is either mythological or erroneous, and he gives abundant evidence for this. The two best scholarly and critical studies of recent times are *Is Christianity True?* by Michael Arnheim, 1984 and *The Case Against Christianity* by Michael Martin 1991. These outstanding studies examine every major Christian doctrine and exposes each of them to the cold light of reason. Another book, *Atheism — The Case Against God* by George Smith, 1989, examines all the arguments for the existence of God and shows that they are illogical, faulty or spurious.

Many excellent books on the teachings of the Buddha are available. A good introduction is *The Life of the Buddha* by H. Saddhatissa, 1988. It includes a well-written biography of the Buddha and a clear account of basic Buddhist concepts. *What the Buddha Taught* by W. Rahula, 1985 and *The Buddha's Ancient Path* by Piyadassi Thera, 1979 are good introductions. *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God* by G. Dharmasiri, 1988 is an excellent but somewhat technical examination of the modern Protestant concept of God from the Buddhist point of view. A most interesting book is *Two Masters One Message* by Roy Amore, 1978. In this

study the author demonstrates that some of what was taught by Jesus is likely to have been derived originally from Buddhism.

Fundamentalist, born-again and evangelical Christianity poses a real threat to Buddhism and while we can never hope to match its aggressiveness or organizational abilities, we can counter them by becoming familiar with Christianity's numerous doctrinal weaknesses and Buddhism's many strengths. If the Christian challenge stimulates in Buddhists a deeper appreciation for the Dhamma and a desire to live by that Dhamma, then that challenge can benefit Buddhism.

